

## An Offer You Can't Refuse

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Summary: Episode three in the Trick chronicles, in which Oz receives a tantalizing offer regarding his lycanthropy.

## An Offer You Can't Refuse

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><br>Feedback? Yes, please.

><br>Suggested listening:

><br>"Cain" by the Choir

>"Rifleman" by the Choir<br>"Jagged" by Old 97's

>"Teenage Nervous Breakdown" by Little Feat<br>

>An Offer You Can't Refuse<br>

>by<br>

>Michael Walker<br>

>Buffy Summers knelt and placed the bunch of flowers atop the small gray square of granite. She fussed with the flowers for a minute, trying to arrange them in some meaningful fashion, then stood, wiping her eyes. Willow Rosenberg stood a few feet behind her, watching her friend's pain and wishing that she could do something, anything, to ease her misery. At last, Buffy turned from the grave, her hand reaching out to Willow. They embraced, the preternaturally strong Slayer clinging to Willow's thin shoulders as a man caught in a strong current might grasp the last rock or tree root.<br>

>Then Buffy stepped back, sniffed and took a deep breath. Willow ducked her head to get a good look in the other girl's eyes. "Are you okay?" the redhead asked.<br>

>Buffy shrugged. "I will be. Thanks for finding his grave." Fresh tears trickled down her cheeks.<br>

>Willow squeezed her friend's hand. "It was nothing. And I mean that. City Hall's computer security is a joke." They began to walk through the cemetery, holding hands, saying nothing, two friends who needed no words to know what was in the other's heart.<br>

>As they reached the path, Willow asked, "How's everything at home?"<br>

>"Oh, yeah, home." Buffy tossed her head back, shaking out her hair. "It's of the weird. Sometimes, my mom sits on the couch and cries

because she's happy that I'm back. Sometimes she cries because I ran away. Sometimes she tries to get me to 'talk' about it. Sometimes she tries to talk about anything but. All in all, it's an asylum."<br>

>Willow kept her voice casual. "Do you want to talk about it?"<br>

>Buffy stopped and turned to her best friend. "Thanks, Will, but not yet."<br>

>Willow bobbed her head. "Okay, then, on a completely different tack, Dingoes are playing at the Bronze tonight. Wanna come?"<br>

>Buffy grimaced. "I'd love to, but I think I should be putting in heavy Mom-time."<br>

>"Understood." They began to walk along the path, heading for the exit. "So, will you be back at school on Monday?" Willow asked.<br>

>Buffy shook her head. "Don't know. Apparently there's some sort of appeal process we have to go through, and I'm pretty sure that Snyder doesn't feel any better about me now than he did before."<br>

>"Don't worry. I think it's just a bunch of hoops he wants you to jump through. He's petty and vindictive." Willow's statement had an air of finality. It made the Slayer smile.<br>

>"True," she said, "but that doesn't make him less annoying."<br>

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>"...and she runs awaaaaayyyyyyy." As Devon's voice trailed off, Oz looked at the floor around his feet. There is was, just off to his right, the small 'x' of masking tape he had put down earlier in the day. As the vocal faded out, Oz moved over to the 'x' and turned the slightest bit to his right.<br>

>The sound started slow, but swelled rapidly. He had spent most of sound check finding the sweet spot on the stage, which annoyed Devon, but it paid off. The feedback was rich and thick, and he could ride it like a wave, altering the pitch and volume just by small movements of his body and guitar. He had a dim impression of Devon caught up in the throes of his "snake dance." According to the lead singer, it drove "the babes wild." Whatever.<br>

>The drummer began to drop in extra tom hits, meaning the song was wrapping up. Oz turned ninety degrees and his amp roared as that high harmonic just bit into the air. Last drum roll coming. Timing was everything. Last measure... 1... 2... 3... 4. Oz jumped off the 'x' and slashed down with his right hand, the edge of his palm catching the Telecaster's volume control and twisting it violently. The feedback cut off in mid-shriek, just as the last cymbal crash died.<br>

>The hush lasted for a heartbeat, then the Bronze exploded. Oz looked over the heads of the screaming throng. Willow stood near the back of the crowd, grinning. She lifted her hands, two thumbs up. Oz winked, then flipped his amp's standby switch, jerked the cord out of the guitar's jack and walked off stage.<br>

>The rest of Dingoes Ate My Baby were waiting. "Man, they're going crazy," Devon enthused. "We've gotta give 'em an encore."<br>

>Oz winced. Devon was of the firm belief that the best encore selections were made on the spur of the moment. Oz thought this gave them a better-than-even chance of sucking, but he could not change the singer's mind.<br>

>"What do you want to play?" Devon asked. Oz thought for a minute.<br>

>"Hopeless Is As Hopeless Does," he said. The rhythm section nodded. The key was to make it look good; Devon didn't need to know that the

three of them had picked out an encore that afternoon.<br>  
>"Okay," Devon said. "Let's do it." He charged back on stage. Oz ambled, checking his amp settings, adjusting the volume. Tone was everything on this song; it had to have an edge, but needed to be clean enough that the open strings could ring without turning the riff into mush. Satisfied that he had it dialed in, he plugged in his guitar.<br>  
>"Hey, thanks a lot." Devon was draped over the mike stand. "This one's a cover. Hope you like it." He stepped away from the mike, Oz stepped forward and let it rip. Oh yeah, he had the tone right tonight.<br>  
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>"...so we're pretty lucky to get an exhibit like this. In two years, there's no way we could bring this artist to Sunnydale." Joyce Summers paused and took a sip of wine.<br>  
>Buffy nodded. "That's nice."<br>  
>Joyce put her glass down on the coffee table. "I'm trying too hard, aren't I?"<br>  
>Buffy nodded again. "Yeah, you really are."<br>  
>Joyce took a deep breath and blew it out. "Well then, shall we just cut through the subtext and get right to it?"<br>  
>Buffy curled up in the armchair, tucking her feet up under her. "Well, it's that or spend the rest of my senior year in more denial than Scott Weiland."<br>  
>"Who?"<br>  
>"Oh, he's the lead singer of Stone Temple Pilots." Her mother's face remained recognition-free. Buffy rolled her eyes. Not exactly off to a blazing start. "He's a heroin addict and he can't seem to... Anyway, he's in a lot of denial, trust me." <br>  
>"I guess I'll have to." Joyce attempted a grin, but achieved only a weak facsimile.<br>  
>Buffy's reply was dead serious. "Yes, you will."<br>  
>Joyce leaned forward, elbows on her knees. "Do you have any idea how hard this is to believe?"<br>  
>"But you do believe it?"<br>  
>Joyce shook her head, looking down at the floor. "I can't think of one single reason to, except..." Her voice trailed away.<br>  
  
>"Except what?" Buffy shifted in the chair.<br>  
>"I saw that man turn into dust when you... You know."<br>  
>"Staked him."<br>  
>"Yes, that." Joyce made a fluttering motion with her hand. "That's not normal."<br>  
>"Actually, it is. For a vampire," Buffy corrected her mother.<br>  
  
>"How... how long have you known? That you were this... Slayer, I mean."<br>  
>Buffy shrugged. "When the gym burned down? My first big statement."<br>  
>Joyce frowned with the effort of trying to absorb all this new information. "So, it was...?"<br>  
>Buffy nodded. "Crawling with bloodsuckers," she said, reaching for her water.<br>  
>Joyce put a finger to her lips, thinking. "So, Spike was... ?"<br>  
  
>"Uh-huh. Vampire."<br>  
>"But you were working with him. Aren't you supposed to kill him? Or is he a good vampire?"<br>  
>Buffy sighed. "It gets really complicated. I'd rather not try to explain it all. Just... there are no good vampires."<br>

>Joyce's voice was very low, almost a whisper. "Buffy, was Angel a...  
I mean, was he one of..."<br>  
>Buffy ducked her head. "Yeah. He was a vampire. But he had a  
soul."<br>  
>"Had?"<br>  
>"Had. He's gone now." Tears began to trace their tracks down the  
Slayer's cheeks.<br>  
>"Gone. Did you have to... do what you do?"<br>  
>Buffy wiped her nose on the back of her hand. "Something like that."  
Her voice was shaky. "Mom, I know that you need to ask more  
questions, but I think I'm all done for tonight. Is that okay?"<br>

>"Of course." Joyce got up from the couch and walked over to the  
chair. She knelt beside it and looped one arm around her daughter's  
shoulders. "There's one other reason I had for believing."<br>

>"What?" Buffy looked at her mother and saw tears that matched her  
own.<br>  
>"You. You may be a lot of things--" Joyce raised a hand,  
interrupting herself. "Check that. I may have thought you were a lot  
of things, like irresponsible and frivolous--"<br>  
>"Gee, thanks," Buffy said in a dry voice.<br>  
>"-but even though you were driving me crazy, you were never crazy,"  
Joyce continued. "You're my daughter. I love you. I know that we have  
more to talk about, but let's just let that be it for tonight,  
okay?"<br>

>Buffy whispered, "Okay. I love you, Mom."<br>  
>As she cradled her daughter to her, Joyce Summers felt her heart  
breaking.<br>

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>Oz checked the latches on his guitar case again. Everything was  
secure. Willow came up behind him and wrapped her arms around his  
neck.<br>

>"That was great. You guys were so on tonight!" She squeezed him  
tight.<br>

>"Thanks. It felt pretty good." He grabbed his guitar cable and began  
winding it around the long axis of his forearm, shaking out the kinks  
as he went and accepting congratulations from fans.<br>

>"Hey, you guys seriously rock." Oz looked up at the sound of an  
unfamiliar voice. It belonged to a guy, tall, with shaggy dark hair  
and a scraggly soul patch.<br>

>"Thanks," Oz replied.<br>

>"You guys play here often?"<br>

>A miniscule grin touched Oz's lips. "You could say that. You must be  
new around here."<br>

>"That I am." The stranger stuck out a hand. "Name's Zane. Zane  
Wilder."<br>

>"Oz." They shook. "What brings you to Sunnydale?"<br>

>"I'm a freshman at the U. You?"<br>

>"Senior at Sunnydale High." Oz tucked his guitar cable inside the  
back of his amp.<br>

>"Cool. Hey, I'll see you around." Zane lifted a hand in a wave and  
walked away.<br>

>"Hey," Willow exclaimed, bouncing up and down, "you've got a new  
fan. And it's a guy who hasn't known you since grade school."<br>

>Oz picked up his amp in one hand and his guitar case in the other.

"It's a start," he said.<br>

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>She stood in front of the house, looking at the door. She knew this

house, or at least she thought she did. It was her home, but it didn't look quite right. She walked up to the front door and the sky changed from day to night. She pushed open the door and looked around.<br>

>"Mom?" she called out. "I'm... home." The room was familiar, but wrong. The furniture was in the wrong places, and the room's angles and dimensions were not quite correct.<br>

>"Buffy?" She turned toward the voice. Her mother came out of the kitchen, wearing an apron and drying her hands on a dish towel. "Oh, honey," Joyce said, "did you have to come back now?"<br>

>Stunned, she took a step backward. "Oh, I don't mean to hurt you," her mother said, hastening to explain. "But we've all gotten used to life without you."<br>

>"Mom, I can't... I can't believe you're saying this," she stammered.<br>

>"Boy, that guy was right. You can't go home again." She turned toward the new voice, and there he stood, leaning against the doorway, arms crossed.<br>

>"Angel?" she whispered.<br>

>"Maybe," he said. "Or maybe not." His face morphed into Angelus' hideous countenance. She gasped, a sharp, fearful intake of breath. His face changed back, back into Angel. Then back into Angelus, and back again, and back and back until it was almost a blur.<br>

>"See, there's the problem," he said. "You never know how it will turn out."<br>

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>When Joyce Summers entered the kitchen on Sunday morning, she found her daughter already seated at the table, mug in front of her.

"You're up early," Joyce said.<br>

>"Yeah," Buffy replied. "It's one of my new habits."<br>

>"Did you sleep all right?" Joyce asked as she poured herself a glass of juice.<br>

>"Okay," Buffy lied. She could not bear to tell her mother that she had spent most of the night huddled on her bed, knees clasped to her chest.<br>

>"Well," Joyce said, sitting down across from her daughter, "do you have any plans for a beautiful Sunday morning?"<br>

>"Sort of." Buffy took a sip from her mug. "I thought later I'd go see Giles. I haven't really talked to him since I got back."<br>

>Joyce nodded. "That's probably a very good idea." She frowned.

"Buffy, does Mr. Giles know about your... hobby?"<br>

>"It's not a hobby, Mom. It's who I am. It's... what I am. And yes, Giles knows. He's my Watcher."<br>

>"Your what?"<br>

>"My Watcher. He's part of an ancient secret society charged with training and overseeing the Slayer. Sort of a combination nanny slash drill sergeant."<br>

>"Well, this just keeps getting more complicated." Joyce's eyes were wide. "What about Willow and--"<br>

>Buffy nodded wearily. "Willow knows. And Xander. And Oz, and Cordelia."<br>

>"Cordelia?"<br>

>"Yeah. I sort of have my own little gang."<br>

>"Do their parents know?" Joyce wavered between puzzled, worried and fascinated.<br>

>"No, their parents do not know." Buffy's tone made it clear that their parents would not know.<br>

>"So, how long will you be... the Slayer?"<br>

>Buffy leaned back in her chair. "It's a lifetime gig, Mom. When you're a Slayer, you're a Slayer all the way. From your first cigarette to your last dying day." Joyce blanched and Buffy realized that 'last dying day' line had been too close. Or maybe it was 'your first cigarette.' She reached out and placed her hand atop her mother's. "Which will not be for a long time. At least, not if I get a vote."<br>

>Joyce started to speak, stopped, and stared at her daughter. "I'm sorry if I'm not handling this well," she said at last. "But it's a lot to process at once."<br>

>Buffy couldn't resist an ironic smile. "Imagine how I felt."<br>

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>Giles saw her coming up the sidewalk. If the truth was known, he'd been keeping a rather close watch out the window, waiting for her. Still, it wouldn't do for her to see him peering out the window like an old maid waiting on a gentleman caller, so he stepped away from the window and arranged himself in an armchair. When the doorbell rang, he hesitated for a moment. Rushing to the door wouldn't look good, either.<br>

>He opened the door, and there stood the Slayer. His Slayer. A slight girl in a lavender halter and black flares, with a sheepish look on her face.<br>

>"Hi," she said. "Okay if I come in?"<br>

>"Of course," he said, stepping back from the threshold. She stepped inside and they looked at each other for a long moment, then she grabbed him in a fierce hug. Giles stood there, flummoxed. He should do something with his hands, but he wasn't sure what. He settled for a clumsy pat on the back.<br>

>"Sorry," Buffy said, stepping back and wiping her eyes. "I know that's probably a little touchy-feely for you, being British and all, but it seemed important."<br>

>Giles occupied himself with removing his glasses and polishing them. "Well, I understand, and it's quite all right." He put his glasses back on. "Would you care to sit down?"<br>

>Emotional moment past, she flopped on the couch as he lowered himself into the chair.<br>

>"How is your reunion with your mother proceeding?" he asked.<br>

>She shrugged. "Bipolar. One minute everything seems normal, or at least like it was before, and the next is like a very special Blossom."<br>

>"Excuse me?"<br>

>Buffy waved a hand. "It was a sitcom. When I was little. It... Okay, let's get back to my mom. Anyway, I guess things are going like they're supposed to go. How are they supposed to go?"<br>

>Giles sighed, a deep and philosophical sound. "I would imagine that you must simply go about daily life and let everything rebuild itself bit by bit. Although, I must say that you seem very... stable after all that's happened."<br>

>Buffy's nod was almost a trembling in her head, it was so small. "Maybe. But a lot of stuff did happen, and I have a lot of questions, Giles."<br>

>He nodded, understanding. "Well, I'm sure there are some fine counselors--"<br>

>"Giles, I don't need a shrink. I have questions for you."<br>

>That stopped him in his tracks. "For me?"<br>

>Buffy nodded. She clasped her hands, trying to control the intensity of her feelings. "Yeah, and here's the first one. You say I'm the

Chosen One. So, who chose me?"<br>

>Giles took off his glasses and began to polish them. "May I ask what prompts this interest?"<br>

>"A lot of weird stuff happened to me while I was gone. I had... dreams, strange dreams, even for me. I thought they would stop, now that I'm home. They haven't. I had one last night."<br>

>"And these dreams are disturbing?"<br>

>"I spent the rest of the night pinching myself to stay awake. It seemed better than risking another one of them."<br>

>Giles chose his words with great care. "What makes these dreams so... frightening?"<br>

>Buffy looked away, then back to her Watcher. "Well, for one thing, they're about Angel."<br>

>Silence filled the home of Rupert Giles. Outside, a bird twittered in the bright California sun. The Watcher and the Slayer gazed at each other. First staring contest I've been in since fifth grade, Buffy thought.<br>

>Giles spoke first. "Then I guess that we should talk about what happened between you on that last night."<br>

>Buffy took a deep breath. It had to come to this, she knew that. "After... after you were gone... he pulled the sword out of Acathla. We... we fought." She stopped.<br>

>Giles was as gentle as possible. "Then what? You obviously stopped Acathla's awakening. How?"<br>

>The Slayer looked down at her hands. Her voice was still and hushed, but firm. "I killed him. I killed Angel."<br>

>"Did you put a stake through his heart?"<br>

>Buffy looked up. "What?"<br>

>Giles steepled his fingers in front of his face, noting that some of those fingers were still healing from the punishment Angel had inflicted. "Did you put a stake through his heart? Did you see him turn into dust?"<br>

>"No." Buffy recoiled. "I stabbed him with the sword Kendra gave me."<br>

>"And exactly how did you do that?"<br>

>"Giles, do we have to--"<br>

>"Yes." The sharpness in her Watcher's voice startled Buffy. He continued in a quieter tone. "I know that this must be difficult for you, but trust me, it is also painful for me to re-live that night." He held up his injured hand. "Angel not only tortured me, but he murdered Jenny and left her in the bed at the top of those stairs--" he pointed "--for me to find. I have my own reasons for wishing to forget, but it's rather obvious that what you are experiencing now has its roots there. If you are serious about discovering what is happening, then you must be truthful. And sometimes truth is hard."<br>

>"Nice lecture, Nurse Ratchett." Giles did not respond to her barb. She tried to blank her mind, to recall the fight as though it had happened to two different people. "The sword went through him and into Acathla. The whirlpool thingy collapsed. Angel was gone."<br>

>"He was sucked into the vortex?"<br>

>Buffy shrugged, listless. "If you say so."<br>

>"Then you didn't kill him."<br>

>Buffy's heart turned to ice. "What?"<br>

>"You did not kill him."<br>

>"Then what happened?" Buffy dreaded what she might hear next.<br>

> "Since the vortex opened onto hell, there's only one conclusion to be drawn."<br>

>"How about we don't draw it out loud?"<br>

>Giles nodded out of respect for his Slayer. Life was going to be tough enough without emphasizing that the love of her life was probably suffering in hell.<br>

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>Xander trotted up the steps to the front door of the school, his Amazing Royal Crowns T-shirt flapping in the breeze. "Why do you insist on wearing that ugly thing?" Cordelia asked as he cruised to a stop at her locker.<br>

>"This?" He looked down at the shirt. "It's a classic. They had to change their name. Now they're just the Amazing Crowns. I'm one of the few guys with an Amazing Royal Crowns shirt."<br>

>"Woo-hoo. That should make for quite a club."<br>

>"Yeah? Well, how about if I made fun of the way you dress, you and your..." Xander looked her over. Her hair was up in a ponytail and she wore a black linen camp shirt over black-and-crÃ"me windowpane plaid shorts. "Okay, so I can't find anything wrong today, but I'll be keeping my eyes open."<br>

>"You do that." Cordelia pulled a book out of her locker. The book slipped out of her grasp and banged off the locker frame and skidded to the floor.<br>

>"Hey, let me." Xander knelt and scooped up the book, placing it in her backpack. "How's the hands?"<br>

>Cordelia held them up for his inspection. The last three fingers of her right hand were bandaged together and the palm was wrapped. All the fingers on her left hand were free, but the hand itself and the wrist were bandaged. A small bandage adorned her left cheek and the left side of her neck still bore faint traces of red. "The doctor says one more week."<br>

>"Well, that's good." Xander tried to put a hopeful spin the situation.<br>

>Cordelia was having none of it. "No, it's not good. In case you haven't noticed, the first football game is this Friday night."<br>

>Now he understood. "And the hands... ?"<br>

>"Yes. The hands. It's hard to do your routines in bandages. Plus, they make me look like a guest on Montel Williams." She gripped the zipper of her backpack between her right thumb and index finger and, with great effort, pulled it closed. Xander did not offer to help; he'd tried that the day after she was released from the hospital and almost died for his trouble.<br>

>He opted for the supportive boyfriend route instead. "You'll work something out."<br>

>Her look wavered between skeptical and pitying. "That's the best you can do? 'You'll work something out'?"<br>

>Xander shrugged. "How about this? The bandages level the playing field. Now, someone might look at the other girls, too."<br>

>Cordelia grinned. "That was good. That was very, very good."<br>

>Xander rubbed a hand over his chest. "Really? How good?"<br>

>Cordelia thought for second. "Not George Clooney good, but definitely better than Anthony Edwards."<br>

>"Yes!" Xander pumped his fist. "I'm better than the balding guy."<br>

>"Be careful," Oz said as he and Willow walked up. "You can hurt your arm like that." He glanced at Xander's torso. "Hey, cool shirt."<br>

>Xander turned to Cordelia. "See?"<br>



>"Don't encourage him," Cordelia commanded Oz.<br>  
>"What brings you guys by?" Xander asked.<br>  
>Willow clutched her books to her chest. "Buffy and her mom are coming to school this afternoon. They have to talk to Principal Snyder. You know, about Buffy's expulsion."<br>  
>Cordelia frowned. "What can we do?"<br>  
>Willow's face scrunched up. "I don't really know. I just thought you ought to know."<br>  
>"We could all try to send positive vibes her way," Xander offered.<br>  
>"I don't think so," Oz said. "Too Richard Gere."<br>  
>"True, Oz-man." Xander shrugged. "Besides, why would she need our vibes? It's not like she's still suspected of murder or anything."<br>  
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>"But the police have cleared Buffy of everything," Joyce Summers said, her voice indignant.<br>  
>"Well then, she's met the 'no murderers' portion of our school-admittance policy. I would point out, however, that that is a particularly low bar." Principal Snyder sat back in his chair, smugness rolling forth from him like waves on the beach.<br>  
>"What else could possibly prevent her from being re-admitted to school?" Joyce tried to remain reasonable, but it was difficult.<br>

>Snyder reached down to open a drawer on his desk and pulled out a thick file. When he dropped it on his desk it made a very solid thump. "That, Mrs. Summers, is your daughter's file. Shall we have a look at it?" He flipped open the manila folder and picked up a sheet of paper. "Why, look what we have right here on top. A transcript. Hmmm." He made a great show of studying the document while Joyce fumed. Buffy slouched beside her on the office sofa. Snyder dropped the transcript back onto the file. "Not the most impressive academic document in the world. Now, what's this?" He plucked a pink slip of paper out of the pile, holding it between thumb and forefinger. "Oh, this is a tardy slip. I wonder how many of them are in this file?" He riffled through the pages. "Many. Not to mention deficiency notices, absentee reports, and a host of other unflattering documentation." He raised his eyebrows and stared at the mother and daughter.<br>

>Joyce took a moment to compose herself. "Mr. Snyder, I would never argue that Buffy has been a model student--" <br>

>"That's good," he grunted.<br>

>Joyce ignored him. "-but that is not the central issue here. You cannot deny a student an education based on... based on tardiness."<br>

>"Mrs. Summers, as a school administrator, I am charged with creating an environment that allows each student the maximum educational opportunity. It is my opinion that your daughter's absence enhances that environment."<br>

>Joyce opened her mouth to speak, but Buffy interrupted. "Give it up, Mom." She stood up. "He's not letting me back in." She stared past her mother, her scornful gaze on the principal. "This is his tiny little slice of power, and he's going to use it."<br>

>"I think," Principal Snyder said, getting to his feet, "that this is precisely the kind of attitude that has resulted in your expulsion, young lady." He turned to Joyce. "And I believe that you should ask yourself where such an attitude was fostered, Mrs. Summers."<br>

>Joyce's eyes blazed. She got out "You haven't heard the last from us, you pompous little--" before Buffy grabbed her arm and began

dragging her out the door.<br>

>"What are you doing?" Joyce demanded, shaking free of Buffy's grip once they were in the hallway. "He's nothing but a prissy little fascist."<br>

>"Mom, here's a news flash- I knew that." The Slayer glanced over her mother's shoulder, making sure the office door was tightly closed. "You're supposed to be the reasonable one. I'm the one who goes postal."<br>

>"I'm sorry." Joyce was making every effort to control herself. "But I think I was right."<br>

>Buffy nodded. "You were. But if I'd lost it and gone over the desk at him, would you have stopped me?"<br>

>Joyce stared at her daughter, then a smile crept across her face.

"No, not right then." She reached out and touched her daughter's hair. "And I don't think assaulting him would have improved our chances to get you back in school."<br>

>"What do we do now?"<br>

>Joyce thought for a moment. "We go home and have dinner. Then we watch a movie. This is just the first round. The Summers girls aren't whipped yet." They began to walk down the hall.<br>

>"Tell you what," Buffy said, "why don't you go home. I'm going to go to the library and see what Giles is up to."<br>

>"That's probably a good idea, since he's your coach."<br>

>"Watcher, Mom, he's my Watcher." Buffy's voice was pitched low to avoid being overheard.<br>

>"Right, right." Joyce tapped herself on the forehead. "I'll get it. Listen, why don't you invite Mr. Giles to dinner tonight?"<br>

>"You sure about that?" Buffy was highly skeptical.<br>

>"I think I have a perfect right to ask someone to dinner when he has my daughter's life in his hands." Joyce's tone said that she would brook no argument.<br>

>"Okay," Buffy replied, her heart not really in it, "I'll invite. But promise you won't fix anything with kidneys in it just because he's English."<br>

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>"Dude, got a minute?" Devon lurched to a stop beside Oz's locker.<br>

>"For you? Always." Oz continued looking for his calculus book.<br>

>"I just got a line on a gig. House party at the U. Good green and if those frat boys like you, they'll buy your stuff."<br>

>"And what stuff would that be?" Oz asked, extracting the book and closing his locker. "I don't recall us recording a CD or getting T-shirts made."<br>

>"Okay, okay, we don't have stuff, but these guys invite the same bands back over and over again. Do you know how much money the Dave Matthews Band made playing colleges before they signed?"<br>

>Oz sighed. "Yeah, I'm aware. What's the date?"<br>

>Devon grinned, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "Week from Sunday."<br>

>Oz pulled a battered calendar out of his hip pocket. He checked the date Devon had indicated. A large red 'X' was drawn through it, the third consecutive day with such a mark. "Sorry," he said, closing the calendar and slipping it back in his pocket. "Can't."<br>

>Devon's bouncing stopped. "Why not?"<br>

>Oz shook his head. "Something I can't get out of."<br>

>"Awww, duuuuuude," Devon moaned. "Not again. Why are you flaking on us so much?"<br>

>"Like I said, I can't get out of it." Oz started off down the hall. Devon followed.<br>

>"It's just... Man, it's just that you used to be the most dedicated guy in the band. Now you're like, blowing us off all the time. What's up?"<br>

>"Well, I think all the time is strong." Oz shifted his books to the other arm. "And it's not something I can ignore. Believe me."<br>

>"I do, man, I do, but it really chaps me to know there's a great gig out there and we can't move on it."<br>

>Oz scratched his chin while he thought. "Maybe you could ask Chris Temple to fill in. He's good."<br>

>"Yeah, but it's not right. Either we're a band or we're not. Real bands don't always ask guys to fill in."<br>

>Oz stopped in the middle of the hall and stared at Devon as the crowd parted and flowed around them. "Are you trying to tell me something?" he asked.<br>

>"Huh?" Devon's look of confusion was all too real.<br>

>"Do you want me out of the band?"<br>

>"Hey, hey, no man, no way." Devon ran a hand through his hair. "How did we get here?"<br>

>"Literal or metaphor?"<br>

>"I don't want you out of the band. C'mon, we started Dingoes! It's just... man, we're seniors." Devon slumped back against the row of lockers. "We've gotta make decisions. If Dingoes are going to make it, we've got to be dedicated, and... Man, I'm not that smart."<br>

>"Huh?" Oz lowered one eyebrow; puzzled face.<br>

>"You're going to college, right? Not me. I'm not college material. This is it, this is plan A, B, and C."<br>

>Oz held up a warning hand. "Whoa, whoa. It's a big jump from missing a gig to major life plans. I've got to go to class. You should probably do the same. Okay?"<br>

>Devon nodded. "Yeah. Sorry if I sound nuts. I just want this band to make it, make it big. And I want you there with me." He stepped forward and grabbed Oz in a fierce hug.<br>

>"Okay," Oz said, "probably shouldn't do that again."<br>

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>"Giles?" Buffy looked around the library, trying to find her Watcher.<br>

>"Yes?" The librarian came out of the cage, the sleeves of his rumpled white shirt rolled to the elbow, his tie loosened and hanging out of his sweater vest. "Excuse me," he continued, "is something funny?"<br>

>Buffy tried to keep from laughing out loud. "Your tie," she snorted, pointing.<br>

>Giles grabbed the end of the offending cravat and stuffed it back inside his sweater. "Did your meeting with Principal Snyder go well?"<br>

>"No. It went the opposite of well. I had to drag my mom out while she called him a prissy fascist. On a scale of one to ten, one being I'm back in school tomorrow, and ten being Snyder chases me out of the building with dogs, it was an eight. Maybe an eight-point-five."<br>

>Giles grimaced. "I had hoped for better."<br>

>"There's a masterpiece of understatement." Buffy leaned on the library counter. "My mom wants you to come to dinner tonight."<br>

>Giles blinked in astonishment. He looked rather like a rumpled owl. "At your house?"<br>

>"That's the only place where we have a say in the menu." Buffy rubbed at a cloudy spot in the counter's varnish. "And, uh, my mom knows about me."<br>  
>"Knows?" Giles voice sounded hollow.<br>  
>Buffy nodded. "Yeah. About me and the whole slayage thing."<br>

>"Well, she suspected already, so I suppose--"<br>  
>"She knows about you, too."<br>  
>Giles gulped. "About me? How could she know about me?"<br>  
>The spot on the counter absorbed all of Buffy's focus. "Maybe because I told her."<br>  
>Giles felt strangely calm and very, very light. "And why would you do that?"<br>  
>The Slayer took a deep breath. "She's my mom. If she knows part of it, she needs to know all of it."<br>  
>Giles bowed his head and rubbed the back of his neck. "Are you sure that was wise?"<br>  
>Buffy shrugged. "No."<br>  
>"Ah, well, that's--"<br>  
>"Giles."<br>  
>He looked at her, surprised at the interruption. He was familiar with being ignored, but not interrupted. "What?"<br>  
>She looked away, then back to him. "I need to know all of it, too."<br>  
>"All of what?"<br>  
>"Who I am. Why I am what I am. If I'm the Chosen One, who chose me?"<br>  
>"Didn't, um, didn't you ask me this yesterday?"<br>  
>"Yeah, I did. And you didn't answer me." Buffy stared at her Watcher.<br>  
>"Perhaps... perhaps we should go into my office," Giles said. He led the way into the book-stuffed cubicle. Buffy moved a half-dozen volumes from chair to floor in order to clear a place to sit.<br>

>"Well," Giles said when they were both seated, but far from comfortable, "what, exactly, do you want me to tell you?"<br>

>Buffy shrugged. "How about the question I keep asking-who chooses the Slayer?"<br>  
>"Yes, well, there are many portents, signs, if you will, and prophecies which help us to recognize the new Slayer upon the--"<br>

>"Giles, I don't want to know how the Watchers know who the new Slayer is. The Slayer is called the Chosen One. Who chooses, or did I just hit the Save-The-World Pick Six?"<br>  
>Giles leaned forward, elbows on knees, and rubbed his jaw with his hands. "Why is this suddenly so important?"<br>  
>Buffy thought for a moment, trying to assemble the right words in the proper order. "This... thing wasn't a phase. I wasn't coming back... Things kept... happening to push me." She shook her head. "And somebody died, somebody who wouldn't have died if he hadn't come here with me, but I wouldn't have come back if I hadn't met him." She looked up at Giles, her eyes boring into him. "So I have to find out if it meant anything."<br>  
>Giles leaned back in his chair. "Buffy, I--"<br>  
>"Don't." Her breathing was faster, audible in the small space. "I've seen you look this way before. You're about to hand me some philosophical line that avoids the question. Don't."<br>  
>He looked around the office, but could not find any place of significant interest to rest his gaze, so he looked back at her.

"You're right. I was going to try and placate you with some sort of aphorism. The truth is, Buffy, I don't know who chooses the Slayer. I have no idea what agency, if any, determines it. It may simply be a genetic confluence, or there might be other... determining factors. I don't know how you were chosen, I only know that you were chosen."<br>

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>Cordelia took a deep breath to calm her fluttering stomach and knocked on the door. It swung open, framing Ms. Hollis. She wore a black sweatshirt over royal-blue spandex shorts and bright white basketball shoes. Cordelia took a small step back.<br>

>"Cordelia," the teacher said. "What can I do for... Girl, what did you do to yourself?"<br>

>"I had an accident, over the weekend--" Cordelia began.<br>

>"Really?" Ms. Hollis' eyebrows shot up. "Do tell. What's the prognosis?"<br>

>"I get the bandages off in a week." Cordelia tried to sound as positive as possible.<br>

>"Well, I'm glad it's not serious, but, in case you haven't noticed, we have a football game this Friday."<br>

>"I know that, and it won't be easy, but, Ms. Hollis, I promise you that I'll find a way to do this. I'll--"<br>

>"Cordelia." Ms. Hollis interrupted her. "Why don't you come into the office and let's talk about this." The teacher stepped back, gesturing for the student to enter. Cordelia hesitated for a heartbeat, then stepped across the threshold.<br>

>Ms. Hollis brushed past her. Settling herself in the swivel chair behind the desk, the teacher indicated the visitor chair. "Have a seat," she said.<br>

>Cordelia lowered herself into the hard wooden seat. Would it kill you to get a cushion, she thought. She sat in uncomfortable silence while Ms. Hollis doodled on a legal pad.<br>

>"Tell you what," the sponsor said, tucking her pencil into her great mass of curly hair, "why don't we move you to the top of the pyramid. Melanie can take your place on the bottom. Will you be able to do anything with your hand?"<br>

>"B-By Friday? A little, I think," Cordelia stammered.<br>

>"Okay, well, you're captain, so you can just call out routines that you can do." Ms. Hollis tossed the pad onto the desk. "Problem solved."<br>

>Cordelia's eyes widened. "That's all?"<br>

>"What did you expect?" Ms. Hollis leaned back, propping her feet on the desk and clasping her hands behind her head. "Cordelia, what's with you?" <br>

>"What?" Cordelia noticed the way the teacher's biceps flexed when she put her hands behind her head. The woman is an Amazon, she thought.<br>

>Ms. Hollis was looking at her the way Indonesian tribesmen look at an airplane. "You're an excellent cheerleader. This is your second year as captain, but you act like you've got to run through the wall every day. I could swear that when you came in here today, you expected me to kick you off the squad."<br>

>Cordelia frowned. "I was afraid you might."<br>

>"Why? You had an accident. Unless you deliberately set your hands on fire to sabotage us. Is that what you did?"<br>

>"No, no, it isn't." Cordelia was offended.<br>

>"See, that's what I mean. I just made a ridiculous joke, and you respond like I'm serious. What's the deal?"<br>

>"Look, Ms. Hollis, I appreciate the attempt at reaching out. Really,

I do." Cordelia stood up. "But nothing is wrong, and I've got to get to class."<br>

>"Okay." The teacher did not move. "See you at practice."<br>

>"Yeah. At practice."<br>

>Cordelia closed the door and leaned against it for a moment, eyes closed.<br>

>\*\*\*\*\*<br>

>Principal Snyder fidgeted in his chair. The woman behind the desk, a pleasant-looking brunette, smiled at him. She was probably just trying to be polite. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and mopped the dome of his head. The receptionist's phone buzzed. She picked it up, listened for a moment, said "Yes, sir", hung up the phone and turned to Snyder.<br>

>"The Mayor will see you now," she said, that sweet smile creasing her cheeks.<br>

>Snyder stood up, took a shaky breath and crossed the room toward the door set in the middle of the opposite wall. He concentrated on keeping his steps even, lest his legs shake. He grasped the doorknob, paused, then turned it and opened the door.<br>

>"Principal Snyder. Thank you for coming."<br>

>Snyder could not see the speaker. The office was not particularly impressive. The floor was covered in industrial gray carpet. A black lacquered desk, its top perfectly clean, was opposite the door. A black sofa stretched along the wall to Snyder's left; an armoire of some sort occupied the right-hand wall. A black leather executive chair sat behind the desk; it was turned so that the back faced Snyder.<br>

>"Well, don't stand there, man. Sit down."<br>

>Snyder scurried over to the couch and sat, feet together, perched on the edge of the cushion. The chair swiveled in his direction, its progress even and deliberate. At last, the chair, and its occupant, faced the principal.<br>

>"Bob," the Mayor said. "So good to see you. How are things?"<br>

>"Well, sir, I must say that this audience is... unexpected. I'm not sure of its purpose." Snyder's left foot began to tap against the carpet.<br>

>The Mayor's eyes shifted from Snyder's face to that foot, then back.

"What I need, Bob, is a status report."<br>

>"St-status report, sir?"<br>

>The Mayor steepled his hands and stared at Snyder. The principal felt sweat trickling along his rib cage. The Mayor dropped his hands and levered himself out of the chair. He strolled to a corner of the desk and perched on it. "The Summers girl. She came to your office today, correct?"<br>

>Snyder nodded. "Yes sir. They are trying to get her back in school."<br>

>"They?" The Mayor's eyebrow lifted; Snyder's pulse increased by seven beats per minute.<br>

>"Yes sir. The girl and her mother."<br>

>The Mayor nodded, digesting this information. "What was your response to their request?" <br>

>"I, I..." Snyder gagged a bit; his throat was suddenly very dry. He tried to swallow. "I refused reinstatement. I had ample grounds. The girl's record is a travesty." Even to his own ears, he sounded whiny and pleading.<br>

>The Mayor nodded, raising an index finger. "I understand, and I'm not questioning your judgment, but I wonder if that was in our best long-term interest."<br>

>"Sir?" Snyder's voice came out in a squeak.<br>  
>"We have to keep our focus on the big picture." The Mayor formed twin L's with his thumbs and index fingers and moved them away from him, like a camera lens. "I'm wondering if keeping her out of school is our best move."<br>  
>"I thought it might isolate her from that librarian," Snyder said.<br>  
>"Yes, good thinking, as far as it went." The Mayor tapped an index finger against his upper lip. "But she can see him after school and on the weekends, plus it leaves her days free to cause untold trouble."<br>  
>"Sir, I--" Snyder began.<br>  
>"I really think we might be better off having her in a position where we can keep an eye on her."<br>  
>"That could very well be, sir. Perhaps if I had more information about--"<br>  
>"Bob." The Mayor straightened, standing with his hands clasped. "I think you know everything that you need to know, and you certainly know more than most. Instead of getting into some silly dispute over turf, why don't we brainstorm a little, see if we can come up with a better solution, hmmm?"<br>  
>"Y-y-yes, sir."<br>  
>The Mayor brought his clasped hands up to chest level and extended his index fingers, pointing at Snyder. "Tell you what, why don't you come up with a plan for reinstatement? Make it tough; I would never ask you to cave in on a matter of principle. I don't embarrass my people that way. I assume that they will want to see you again?"<br>  
  
>"Yes, sir, I think that's a given."<br>  
>The Mayor nodded, thinking. "Good. Wait for them to call you. Then present your plan."<br>  
>Snyder nodded, then a terrible thought struck him. "What if they reject the plan?"<br>  
>The Mayor chuckled. "I don't think we have to worry about that. Still, let's just say that it's your responsibility to make sure that doesn't happen. Agreed?"<br>  
>Snyder swallowed, his stomach roiling. "Agreed," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.<br>  
>"Good." The Mayor grinned and stepped behind his desk. As he sat down, he flashed a smile at Snyder. "Thanks so much for coming in, Bob. You're doing a fine job at the school."<br>  
>Snyder was halfway out the door. "Thank you, sir." He stepped into the outer office.<br>  
>"Well," said the receptionist, "did everything go well?"<br>  
  
>Snyder's smile twitched and threatened to slide right off his face. "As well as could be expected."<br>  
>\*\*\*\*\*<br>  
>"So you can't do the gig?" Willow's voice was plaintive as she and Oz slumped side by side on a sofa at the Bronze. Tonight's band was called Engines of Industry. Their lineup was one guitar, singer, bass, drums, and the guy Oz was checking out, a guy who had so far played cello, accordion, percussion, harmonica and guitar in addition to running the band's samples and loops.<br>  
>"No. Bad time of the month." Oz gestured toward the stage. "Check it out. The rest of the band kind of sucks, but he's got it happening."<br>  
>"Doesn't it bother you?" Willow half-turned toward him.<br>  
>Oz shrugged. "Not as much as turning into a wolf in the middle of the gig and taking out half the crowd. 'Bother's a relative

term."<br>

>"I guess so." Willow turned her attention to the band. "They really are bad. Did you know we can't go to the Net Dance?"<br>

>Oz nodded. "Yeah. I know the dates for the whole school year. Probably should be glad that homecoming, prom and graduation are clear."<br>

>"Missing graduation would suck."<br>

>An ironic smile crossed Oz's lips. "Tell me about it."<br>

>"Huh? Oh, you mean, because of last year, and..." Willow let her face finish the question. Oz nodded. They sat in silence until the band finished. A smattering of applause rippled through the Bronze. Willow sat up straighter. "If you'll buy, I'll fly," she said. Oz dug a couple of dollars out of his pocket. "What do you want?" she asked.<br>

>"Surprise me," he said.<br>

>Willow gone on a drink run, he turned back to the band. He really needed to meet this guy.<br>

>"Hey, man, what's up?"<br>

>Oz turned toward the voice. It was that guy from the other night, Zane. Oz shrugged. "Not much."<br>

>"Hey, I heard you guys couldn't play the gig at our frat house. Bummer." Zane leaned over, resting his crossed arms on the back of the couch.<br>

>"Yeah, another engagement," Oz said.<br>

>Zane shook his head. "It's a bitch, ain't it?"<br>

>Oz frowned. "'scuse me?"<br>

>Zane sighed. "Always having to change your schedule, not being your own man. Gets old, doesn't it?"<br>

>"I guess," Oz said. "Or it might, if I knew what you were talking about."<br>

>Zane chuckled. "That's good." He leaned down further, his lips mere inches from Oz's ear. "I'm talking about the beast, man. You think it's an accident that you got offered a gig on the full moon?" Oz shot him a sharp glance. "Oh, that's right, I guess it's just a coincidence." Zane's voice grew harsh. "C'mon, I can smell it on you."<br>

>"Gee," Oz said, trying to concentrate on the stage, "guess I'll have to write Mennen and demand a refund."<br>

>"Joke all you want." Zane turned toward the stage, speaking out of the side of his mouth. "You can feel it, you can feel it right now."<br>

>Oz's head snapped around. "What is it I'm supposed to be feeling?"<br>

>Zane turned. Oz stared directly into his eyes. A low growl rolled out of Zane's throat. His eyes turned the slightest shade of gold. Then it was past, and he was just Zane again, rummaging in his shirt pocket for something.<br>

>"Tell you what," he said, "if you're interested in controlling what you don't know anything about, I'm meeting some guys in Room 310 of the Campus Union. 7:30 Thursday night." He slapped Oz lightly on the shoulder. "I hope you're there." He straightened and walked away.<br>

>"Hey." Willow arrived, carrying two cardboard cups. "Isn't that the guy from the other night? What did he want?"<br>

>Oz took his drink. "Oh, nothing. It was a misunderstanding."<br>

>\*\*\*\*\*<br>

>"So, Mr. Giles, Buffy tells me that you're her... some kind of teacher for her?"<br>

>Giles paused in mid-chew, then swallowed. "Well, yes, I'm a



Watcher."<br>

>Joyce Summers took a drink of wine. "How did you get into that line of work?"<br>

>"Well, uh, I assure you it's not the sort of thing for which one applies." Giles took another bite. "Is this rice pilaf?"<br>

>"Mmm-hm. So, did these Watchers recruit you?"<br>

>Giles sighed. "My father was a Watcher. That's how it tends to be. It runs in families."<br>

>"I see." Joyce smiled pleasantly and turned to her food.<br>

>Buffy closed her eyes. This evening was a nightmare. Her mom kept pumping Giles for information and Giles kept ducking. Pretty soon, someone was going to get hurt.<br>

>"Buffy tells me that you visited Principal Snyder today." Giles' voice was bland, but Buffy caught the glint in his eye. Perhaps the best defense was a good offense. "I understand it did not go as well as you might have hoped."<br>

>"That would be an understatement." Joyce frowned. "Is there any sort of rule against the Slayer trying to... persuade him?"<br>

>"I'm afraid that would be a serious breach. The Slayer's identity is supposed to remain a secret."<br>

>Joyce pursed her lips. "I'm afraid Buffy hasn't done a very good job of that."<br>

>"Hey!" Buffy put down her fork.<br>

>Giles nodded. "We have a very unusual situation, yes, but I believe that all of Buffy's friends found out on their own."<br>

>Buffy cocked her head to one side. "Technically, I don't think Oz found out for himself. He was Willow's date for my birthday party when we got attacked."<br>

>Giles thought for a moment, then inclined his head in her direction. "You're right."<br>

>"Attacked? At your birthday party?" Joyce's face was a study in consternation.<br>

>"Mom, I told you, this is world-saving stuff. That means the bad guys really want to hurt you."<br>

>"But, you're only seventeen--"<br>

>"Mrs. Summers, I can assure that Buffy's skills and abilities are more than adequate to her task."<br>

>As Joyce stood up, her napkin fell to the floor. "I'm sorry. I'm really trying to understand all of this, but I... I just... Excuse me." Pressing a hand to her mouth, she whirled and left the room.<br>

>Giles and Buffy sat in silence for a moment, then Giles cleared his throat. "This might not be the perfect time to broach the subject, but have you given any thought to resuming your patrols?"<br>

>Buffy chewed her lower lip. "A little. I know I have to get back on the horse. How about tomorrow night?"<br>

>Giles nodded. "I think that would be excellent. Don't push too hard. Patrol the most obvious places, then work up to complete coverage. Make sure someone goes with you."<br>

>Buffy played with her napkin. "Are you sure that's a good idea? I mean, someone going with me."<br>

>Giles opened his mouth, then thought better of whatever he was going to say. Instead, he reached out and covered her hand with his own. "I know that, in most cases, the Slayer does not have friends who share her secret. The Council might not agree with me, but I believe that you are fortunate. You've gone through a traumatic experience, but so have they. Don't close yourself off from them."<br>

>"That's easy for you to say. Everyone you know hasn't been hurt because of you."<br>  
>Giles leaned back. "No, not everyone. Just most of them. And, forgive me for sounding like the stodgy old Watcher now, but they all volunteered."<br>  
>"They didn't know what they were getting into. Just look around, Giles. Willow in the hospital, Xander with a broken arm, and you--" she made a waving gesture which Giles took to include all of the various injuries he'd suffered, "-and... and... Miss Calendar. And..." Her voice trailed off.<br>  
>"Look at me." Giles voice was very low and quiet, but with an intensity that drew her eyes to his face. "Those physical injuries were nothing compared to how they've suffered for the past three months. Do you know that they came into the library every day, even Cordelia? Did you know that they took over your patrols, the four of them?" A small smile creased Giles mouth. "And they were incompetent."<br>  
>Buffy blinked. A corner of her mouth twitched. "Really?"<br>

>Giles' grin broadened. "What do you think?" The grin turned into an affectionate smile. "But they were very brave, and they did it because it needed to be done, and because they believed you would be back." The smile faded. "Don't diminish what they did by treating them as fragile inferiors."<br>  
>"But Giles, we're talking about their life."<br>  
>"A fact they are well aware of. I don't think any of them are under any illusions about that."<br>  
>The corners of Buffy's mouth turned down. "I'll try. Okay?"<br>

>He nodded. "That's all anyone can do."<br>  
>\*\*\*\*\*<br>

>Oz fingerpicked the last G7 chord, took the pencil out of his mouth and leaned over to write in the notebook that lay open on his desk. That finished the song; the only question now was what to do with it. He didn't think it would work for Dingo's. Too ballady. Still, it was a good song.<br>

>He glanced up at the clock on the wall. Almost time. He tugged the sleeve of his sweatshirt down over his hand and wiped off the guitar, then placed it in the case. His fingers brushed against the spruce top, yellowed with age. The guitar had belonged to his grandfather and then to his father. In pristine condition, it would be a collector's item, but three generations of Osbornes had guaranteed that would never happen. The lacquer finish was worn away beneath the pickguard, and the body had accumulated an impressive and interesting array of dings and scratches. The scratches are what make it special, Oz thought as he closed the case and latched it.<br>

>The phone rang as he was sliding the case under the bed. "Hey," he said, dropping into his chair.<br>

>"Did you know it was me?" Willow asked.<br>

>"Who else gives me a good night call?"<br>

>"There better not be anybody."<br>

>Oz smiled. "There isn't."<br>

>"Good." Willow's voice went up a step. "Oh, Cindy Marcus is having a party next Friday. She invited us. It should be on the funnish side."<br>

>Oz groaned. "Friday's the first day of my phase."<br>

>There was a silence, brief but unmistakable, before Willow spoke. "I forgot. I'll tell her we can't come."<br>

>"No," Oz said, "you should go."<br>

>"Without you?"<br>

>"You've gone to parties without me before."<br>  
>"Not since we've been a couple."<br>  
>"Okay, point to you. But if it's a cool party, go ahead. Not like you can do anything for me while I'm Mr. Furry."<br>  
>"Are you sure?"<br>  
>"I won't be hurt."<br>  
>"I wish we didn't have to deal with this." The sorrow and frustration in Willow's voice was clear.<br>  
>"But we do." Oz kicked off his shoes. "Everybody has to deal with something."<br>  
>"You're right. Again." Willow sighed. "Good night."<br>  
>"Sorry to end on such a bummer."<br>  
>"Well, I'll see you tomorrow, and that will make everything all right."<br>  
>Oz grinned. "I'm grinning," he said. "Good night."<br>  
>As he crawled into bed, his gaze fell on the small piece of paper that lay on his desk, right beside his notebook.<br>  
>\*\*\*<br>  
>"Any plans for today?" Joyce asked as her daughter came down the stairs.<br>  
>"Nope," Buffy said. "Thought I'd just hang."<br>  
>"Enjoy it. I called the school and made another appointment to see Principal Snyder tomorrow morning." Joyce slung her bag over her shoulder. "See you this evening."<br>  
>Buffy blurted, "Mom."<br>  
>"Yes?" Joyce paused, hand on doorknob.<br>  
>"I'm... I'm going to start patrolling again tonight."<br>  
>Her mother's hand slipped and fell to her side. "Is that smart?"<br>  
  
>Buffy forced a smile and shrugged, hands wide. "It's what I do."<br>  
  
>A haunted look crossed Joyce's face. "This really is who you are?" Buffy nodded. Joyce swallowed, hard. "Will you be careful?"<br>  
  
>"Mom, I'm always careful." Buffy casually moved one hand behind her back and crossed her fingers.<br>  
>Joyce shook her head and opened the door. She stopped on her way out and turned back. "Buffy, that night at the school, when we were all trapped... That was... ?"<br>  
>Buffy nodded. "Yeah, Mom. Vampires."<br>  
>Joyce rolled her eyes and sighed. "It just gets stranger and stranger." She looked at Buffy. "Be good," she said, going out the door.<br>  
>\*\*\*<br>  
>It was a beautiful Tuesday morning in Sunnydale. Buffy went into cruise control and let her feet wander where they would. Mid-morning found her sitting on a park bench, eyes closed, head back, enjoying the warm sun on her face. She twisted slightly from side to side. Her ribs felt fine. Her mind wandered as she felt the warmth of the sun seep through her hair and massage her scalp.<br>  
>Was this what her life would be? Hunting evil by night, sunning in the park by day? Could the Slayer leave Sunnydale? Kendra had left her home. But if she left, where would she go. Face it, Buffy thought, you don't have a plan.<br>  
>She opened her eyes and looked around. A tall, lanky guy dressed in black stalked across the grass. A woman lifted a toddler out of a stroller and began to play with her. Two young women were seating a group of pre-schoolers in a circle. Buffy's eyes were drawn to the tree that shaded them. Why? Why was she focusing on the tree?<br>

>She remembered. She had staked a couple of vamps under that tree, a male and female. In fact, she had dispatched several of the creatures in this park. She looked back at the circle of children, faces turned toward one of the women, who was reading them a story. A strange, unbearable lightness filled her head. The sun's rays turned from warm to scorching. The heat danced along her arms and around her scalp. She shoved herself up from the bench and left the park, not quite running, but definitely not just walking.<br>

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>"The end of another day," Willow muttered to herself. She sorted out her books and put the ones she needed for homework in her backpack.<br>

>"Hey, Willow!" She turned toward the sound of her name as Cindy Marcus came to a screeching halt at her locker. Cindy was what Willow's mom referred to as "petite" and Willow called "tiny." Barely five feet tall with flaming red hair, Cindy shot through life at a pace to make Chuck Yeager jealous.<br>

>"So, are you coming to my party?" Cindy asked in that slightly breathless voice.<br>

>Willow nodded, smiling for no good reason, except that Cindy always provoked one. "Yeah, I think I'll be able to make it."<br>

>Cindy bounced on the balls of her feet. "Will Oz be coming with you?"<br>

>Willow shook her head. "I'm afraid he can't."<br>

>Cindy nodded, and kept nodding long after the need for nods had passed. "He got a gig or something?"<br>

>Willow hesitated, then said, "Yeah, that's it."<br>

>"Well, that's cool." Cindy punched her on the shoulder. "See you later." She set off down the hall at a clip that would have been a dash for anyone else.<br>

>"Yeah," Willow said, feeling a little dizzy from the tornado of enthusiasm that had engulfed her. "See you." She turned back to her locker.<br>

>That's when it hit her. The gray fog moved in and the voices began chattering in her head. Colors bled and ran together, and she was seized with an overwhelming sense of being adrift, not anchored to anyplace. She couldn't even be sure if her feet were still on the ground.<br>

>The voices (if that's what they were) grew louder, then split from each other, changing from a mass of garbled utterances to distinction. She could almost understand what they were saying. The small point of white light began to grow behind her eyes, and pain grew with it. The light expanded to fill her entire field of vision as her head throbbed.<br>

>When the light filled every cranny of her skull, it popped like an overinflated balloon. The voices faded with the pain. Willow found herself clutching the door of her locker, knees shaking. She looked around. There was no one else in the hall. Closing the locker, she checked her clothes and made her way out of the school.<br>

>\*\*\*\*<br>

>Buffy examined the stake with great care, checking for splinters or deep fissures in the wood. Satisfied that it would do the job, she tossed it into the Slayer bag with its mates and zipped the bag closed.<br>

>"Going out?"<br>

>Buffy's head whipped around. Her mother leaned against the doorjamb, arms crossed. The Slayer relaxed.<br>

>"Yeah," she said, hoisting the bag to her shoulder. "And out the front door for once."<br>

>"Any idea when you'll be back?"<br>  
>Buffy stopped at the top of the stairs and looked back at Joyce.  
"Mom, slaying's pretty free-form. It's not like I've got a shift that ends."<br>  
>Joyce nodded. "Okay."<br>  
>"Try not to worry?"<br>  
>Joyce forced a smile. "Sure."<br>  
>"Liar." Buffy went to her mom and kissed her on the cheek. "I'm really very good at this. I have to be."<br>  
>"Is anyone going with you?"<br>  
>Buffy hesitated for a split-second. "Everybody's busy," she said. "I'll be fine."<br>  
>\*\*\*\*<br>  
>Mom didn't need to worry, Buffy thought. The night had been as barren as Giles' refrigerator. She had walked on pins and needles for the first half-hour, then grown progressively more bored. Now she was just shlumping along flat-footed, bag slung over her shoulder. Another half-hour and she would call it a night.<br>  
>The sound was faint at first, so that she had to stop and concentrate on bringing it into focus. The sound of a child's laughter, and a mother's response. Buffy's heart dropped through her diaphragm and bounced off her stomach as she rummaged through the Slayer bag for a stake and began to sprint in the direction of the voices.<br>  
>As she drew closer she checked her speed, beginning to search the darkness for signs of an enemy. She stood in the middle of the sidewalk, the street to her right deserted, the woman and her child around the corner, ahead and to her left, hidden by a tall hedge. The soft glow of streetlights bathed the street in their vaporous radiance. Taking deep breaths to calm herself, Buffy began to advance toward the corner, very close to tiptoeing.<br>  
>She allowed the Slayer bag to slip from her shoulder when she reached the corner. Her stake gripped in her right hand, she waited, listening. It didn't take long.<br>  
>It started with a scream. Buffy wheeled around the corner, stake at the ready. A woman stood in the middle of the sidewalk, fear freezing her face into a pale mask as she kept her body between a small child and a dark figure. As Buffy watched, the attacker clubbed the woman over the head, knocking her to her knees.<br>  
>"Hey, new meat," the Slayer shouted, "if you're hungry, I've got all the ass-kicking you can eat over here." Light glinted off fangs as the demon turned toward her. He paused for a minute, sizing her up, measuring her size.<br>  
>"Who the hell are you, little girl?" he snarled.<br>  
>"Oooh, evil and sexist. You've successfully erased any moral qualms I might have been feeling," Buffy said. The vampire charged. Buffy knew this one would be easy just from watching him run. Sure enough, she dodged his first assault with ease. A quick scissors-kick dumped him onto the ground, but the adrenaline rush of self-preservation spurred him to his feet before she could finish him. He circled her, wary, then rushed. She ducked under his arms, back-kicking him as he went by, so that he sprawled onto all fours.<br>  
>Finish it, Buffy thought. She grabbed the vamp by the shoulder and flipped him over, driving her knee into his chest as he landed on his back. The air whooshed from his lungs and he lay there, gasping. Her right arm flashed back, muscles coiled for the killing strike.<br>  
>And she froze. The vamp stared at her, goggle-eyed, until, realizing his good fortune, he gave her a violent shove. The off-balance Slayer tumbled backwards. The vamp leaped to his feet. Not bothering with

bravado or threats, he ran off into the night.<br>

>"Are you all right?" Buffy looked up to see the would-be victims standing over her. The woman was speaking. "What happened?"<br>

>Buffy pulled herself to her feet and straightened her clothes.

"Nothing," she said. "He just looked like someone I used to know."<br>

>\*\*\*\*<br>

>"Do we have a plan for this?" Buffy twisted her shoulders, trying to get comfortable inside the pink sweater that she wore over the white dress patterned with pink roses.<br>

>"Mostly, we try to stay calm and impress Mr. Snyder with our composure." Joyce's attention was focused on driving the Jeep as she turned into the SHS parking lot.<br>

>"So we have no plan."<br>

>"It's the best I could do. Stop fidgeting. You'll wrinkle your dress."<br>

>Buffy fussed with her skirt. "This thing fits like a saddle on a cow."<br>

>"That's nonsense. You look lovely."<br>

>Buffy rolled her eyes. "Please. I look like I'm auditioning for Our Town."<br>

>Joyce shot her a glance. "And it won a Pulitzer."<br>

>The dress wasn't quite so annoying on the move. They were almost at the office when Buffy heard someone call her name and turned. Xander jogged down the hallway toward them.<br>

>"Hey, what's up?" he asked.<br>

>Buffy jerked a thumb at the door. "We're here to see Snyder again."<br>

>He nodded. "Hope it goes okay. Listen, want to join us for lunch?"<br>

>Buffy looked at her mom. "Fine by me," Joyce said. The Slayer turned back to her friend.<br>

>"Sure, that would be nice."<br>

>"Okay," Xander said. "I'll clue everybody else in, and we'll see you in the Chamber of Horrors." He lifted a hand. "And now, I must go and explain why I am late for English Lit."<br>

>Principal Snyder was in his customary place behind his desk as Joyce and Buffy were shown into the office. A slight nod was his sole acknowledgement of their presence as they sat on the couch. A silence, almost cosmic in its discomfiture, settled over the room. Joyce sat with her purse in her lap, hands folded. Snyder signed forms, making a great point of ignoring their presence. Buffy tried to not pull at her dress.<br>

>Snyder scratched his name across the final form, capped his pen and placed it on the desk. Then, and only then, did he look at them and speak.<br>

>"Mrs. Summers, thank you for coming in this morning. I appreciate your concern over your daughter's educational status. I can assure you that I share your concern." Snyder leaned back in his chair. A spring creaked. "That's why, after much thought, I have instituted a reinstatement plan for her. It will be provisional, of course. Should she fail to meet any of the conditions of this plan, I would be forced to expel her again."<br>

>"Conditions?" The faintest hint of an edge crept into Joyce's voice.<br>

>"Buffy will see the school counselor once a week. She will also be required to make up all missed work. I will, of course, allow the individual teachers some leeway regarding those exact requirements. I'm afraid this means she will have to meet with all of her teachers

individually, outside of class time."<br>

>Joyce opened her mouth to protest, but Buffy cut her off. "We'll take it," the Slayer murmured. Joyce wheeled, eyes flashing. Her daughter stood up from the couch.<br>

>"Mom, this is as good as it'll get," Buffy said, looking down at her mom. "I'll get Will to help me with the make-up work. It won't take forever." She shifted her attention to Snyder. "How long do I have to see the counselor?"<br>

>"Until Ms. Dortmann believes you've resolved whatever issues prompted this unfortunate episode."<br>

>There was the poison pill. A silent groan bubbled up through Buffy's unconscious. Ms. Dortmann would probably keep scheduling her three years after she graduated. Still, she didn't hold that many cards in this hand.<br>

>"Okay," she said. "Can I start back on Monday?"<br>

>Snyder nodded, his attention already turned away. "Fine."<br>

>Out in the hall, Joyce fumed. "I can't believe that arrogant little--"<br>

>"Mom." Buffy interrupted. "I've handled monsters. I think I can deal."<br>

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>"Ewww," Cordelia whined. "Who let Donna Reed out of the house?"<br>

>"Hush," Willow commanded. "I think it's cute."<br>

>"It's different," Oz offered.<br>

>They were watching Buffy make her way across the cafeteria. The crisply pressed skirt of her dress made navigating the pathway between tables somewhat difficult. A frown creased her forehead by the time she reached them.<br>

>"Nice threads," Xander said as he pulled out a chair.<br>

>"Please," Buffy growled as she dropped into the chair. "I'm sweating like Ben Hur on a bad day in this thing."<br>

>Willow shook her head. "Well, I think it's--"<br>

>Buffy held up a warning finger. "I love you, Will, but if you say it's cute, I will beat you to death with a breadstick."<br>

>"Normally, I would call that hyperbole, but I believe that these are just the breadsticks for the job." Xander thumped one of them on the edge of the table. "Sounds pretty solid to me."<br>

>Buffy scowled. "I hate the thought of standing in line in this outfit."<br>

>Willow nodded and grinned. "We already got you a lunch." She pushed the orange plastic tray toward the Slayer.<br>

>"What is it?" Buffy asked.<br>

>"Lasagna," Willow replied.<br>

>"Well, that can't be too bad."<br>

>"Don't be so sure," Xander warned. "They spelled it with an 'h' and a 'y' on the menu."<br>

>Buffy smiled and took a bite. The smile soured into a grimace as she chewed and swallowed. "They needed another 'h'," she said.<br>

>"So, how did the meet'n'greet go?" Oz asked.<br>

>Buffy shrugged. "I'm back in."<br>

>Willow clapped. "Yay!"<br>

>"Don't get your yays in an uproar," Buffy cautioned. "There are conditions."<br>

>"Like what?" Xander asked. Buffy explained Snyder's plan to them.<br>

>"Well, Ms. Dortmann aside, that's not so bad," Willow offered. "I'll

help you catch up on your work."<br>  
>"Me too," Oz said.<br>  
>"Do you have the time?" Buffy asked.<br>  
>Oz shrugged. "I took most of my classes last year. I'm basically recycling papers. I got time."<br>  
>"The important thing is, you're back." Xander bit off a hunk of bread.<br>  
>"Yeah," Willow said. "You're back."<br>  
>Everyone looked at Cordelia. "What?" she asked, blank-faced. "Oh, yeah, right. It's, uh, it's great to have you back, my life is complete, yada yada yada."<br>  
>"Thanks, Cordy. I can always count on you to keep me humble." Buffy's voice was syrupy-sweet.<br>  
>"Did you get your schedule?" Willow asked.<br>  
>Buffy nodded. "I thought I'd start seeing teachers this afternoon. Might as well get a jump on the whole thing." Her expression said that she'd rather jump off the whole thing.<br>  
>"You know, we should all get together at the Bronze tonight," Willow said.<br>  
>Xander arched his eyebrows. "You're thinking... celebration?"<br>  
  
>Willow grinned. "Indubitably."<br>  
>Oz slouched back in his chair. "I'm in."<br>  
>Buffy considered, then nodded. "Okay."<br>  
>Xander turned to his right. "Cor?"<br>  
>"Sorry." Cordelia began gathering her trash. "Can't."<br>  
>An awkward silence settled over them. Xander cleared his throat. "Well, maybe I should, uh... pass."<br>  
>"No." Cordelia stood, picking up her tray, now piled with napkins and other detritus. "You go. I'll give it a skip." She walked away from the table, leaving four open mouths in her wake.<br>  
>Willow turned to Xander. "Is something wrong?"<br>  
>He shrugged, still watching Cordelia depart. "Not that I know of." He turned back to the others. "Probably a cheerleading thing."<br>  
  
>Willow frowned. "Is there a problem?"<br>  
>"Palace intrigue. Cordy thinks Harmony is conspiring with Amy to have her removed from her captain's position. She also thinks Ms. Hollis is in on it."<br>  
>"Ms. Hollis scares me," Oz said. "Hey," he continued, in response to the looks sent his way, "I'm a little guy."<br>  
>"Whoa, whoa," Buffy said, holding up her hands. "Remember me, missed a couple of weeks?"<br>  
>"Oh, yeah," Willow said.<br>  
>"Harmony and Cordelia are holding the ultimate ninja-death popularity contest." Xander took a drink. "It's not pretty."<br>  
  
>"So Cordelia's upset?" Buffy asked.<br>  
>"Yes," Willow said. "And J. Edgar Hoover led a slight double life."<br>  
>"Upset isn't the word I'd choose," Xander offered. "I'm more inclined toward paranoid."<br>  
>"Do you think partying tonight is a good idea?" Buffy turned her skeptical face toward him.<br>  
>Xander held up his hands in surrender. "I'll try to get her to go. If she can't, I'll bag it to be with her - you guys go ahead."<br>  
  
> "Are you sure?" Willow was in full-blown concern mode.<br>  
>"Yes, I'm sure." Xander got up. "We might be a little late, but we'll be there."<br>



>"Wow," said Buffy, shaking her head. "Did I miss some episodes or what?"<br>

>"It's different," Oz observed. "You cool with that?"<br>

>"Kind of have to be, don't I?" Buffy answered in a melancholy voice.<br>

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>Buffy looked at the clothes laid out on her bed, stepped back, then picked up a red tank top and placed it over a pair of gray pants. Shaking her head, she tossed both garments on the floor. That meant she was going with the only remaining outfit: navy blue sleeveless mock T-neck over black pants with a rose embroidered over the right front pocket and her new Puma running shoes. She shook out her hair and was checking herself in the mirror when her mother spoke from the doorway.<br>

>"Does it always take so much time to pick out a slaying outfit?"<br>

>Buffy turned. "Not patrolling. Hanging at the Bronze."<br>

>Joyce nodded. "Will you be late?"<br>

>Buffy shrugged. "Maybe. But I won't be alone. Willow and Oz will be there."<br>

>Joyce smiled. "Have a good time, okay?"<br>

>Startled, Buffy could only nod. "Okay," she finally said, drawing the word out to three syllables as her mother left.<br>

>It was dim, hot and crowded at the Bronze. The DJ seemed to be working overtime. When Buffy stepped inside the door, she spotted a waving hand. She headed into the crowd, using the hand as a beacon. She reached the table Oz and Willow had snagged. Willow lowered her hand.<br>

>"Hey," the redhead said, a huge smile lighting her face, "you look great."<br>

>"Thanks." Buffy slid onto one of the high chairs. She jerked a thumb toward one of the speakers. "Who's playing?"<br>

>Willow turned to Oz. "Roni Size and Reprazent," he said, slurping on a soda. "I think it's a cut off the 'New Forms' album."<br>

>"So," Willow said, "here we are, the three of us. We three." She sat there, nodding, smile frozen on her face.<br>

>Buffy sighed. "Will, it's okay. I'm not going to freak."<br>

>Willow nodded too rapidly. "I know. It's just, I want things to be normal, but then I think that the only way for them to be normal is by pretending, and I don't want to pretend, and then, then my head starts hurting."<br>

>Buffy folded her hands on the table and nodded. "Well, you certainly broke a lot of ice there, Will."<br>

>"Enough for the Northwest Passage," Oz observed.<br>

>"Look," Buffy said, "I know that there's a lot, a lot of baggage here, but please can we just unpack it later?"<br>

>Oz shrugged. "Sure. Cool. Why?"<br>

>It was the one question that could have startled Buffy, and it did. "Why?"<br>

>"Yeah." Oz shifted in his seat. "I'm not trying to be Freud here, but it matters."<br>

>"Oz." Willow's voice ran up the scale as she hissed his name. Buffy stared at the spiky-haired guitarist, who gazed back with calm, almost detached eyes.<br>

>"Okay," the Slayer said. "A lot of it's very heavy, and I can't deal with all of it coming out at once. I'm not wild about being crushed underneath it."<br>

>Oz fiddled with the straw in his drink. "So, it's not just avoid and deny."<br>

>Buffy shook her head. "No. It's more don't pick at the scab."<br>

>He nodded. "Understood."<br>

>She smiled. "Thanks. And I mean that."<br>

>"Oh, look," Willow yelled. "Xander made it."<br>

>Buffy turned to see Xander and Cordelia coming toward them. Xander wore a short-sleeved seersucker buttondown shirt with a torn pocket over a T-shirt with a logo so faded it was impossible to read at any distance above eighteen inches. It was hard to tell anything about his pants, aside from the fact that they were dark, baggy, shapeless and floppy. Cordelia, on the other hand, wore a jersey scoop-neck T in robin's egg blue, a pair of patterned olive-drab pants with blue highlights that matched the shirt, and olive suede flats. The bandages on her hands were almost irrelevant. <br>

>"If anyone else wore those pants, their ass would look like a boxcar," Willow said. Buffy arched an eyebrow. "Sorry," Willow mumbled, eyes downcast. "Momentary case of butt envy."<br>

>Oz murmured, "There's nothing wrong with your butt."<br>

>Buffy, a strange expression on her face, turned to the redhead. "What's wrong?" Willow asked.<br>

>Buffy gave a vague head shake. "I just... I mean, I know they were dating, but I haven't... I mean, I haven't seen them together and..."<br>

>"I know," Oz observed, voice dry. "Hits me that way sometimes and I see them every day."<br>

>"What's so funny?" Xander asked as they arrived at the table.<br>

>"Oh, Oz just made a humorous observation," Buffy said, trying to smother giggles.<br>

>"What?" Cordelia asked.<br>

>Oz shook his head. "It's escaped into the ether, never to be recaptured."<br>

>Cordelia shot him an annoyed look. "Whatever."<br>

>"Hey, we're really glad you could make it," Willow said, leaning toward Cordelia.<br>

>Cordelia rolled her eyes. "It seemed preferable to listening to someone whine about not going," she said, casting a pointed look toward her boyfriend.<br>

>"Me? Whine? Madam, I reject your characterization of me. I cajoled, I persuaded, I wove a web of-"<br>

>"You whined," Cordelia said flatly.<br>

>"I whined," Xander said, voice meek.<br>

>Buffy smiled and, to her surprise, relaxed a bit. Oz offered to get drinks for everyone. Xander placed his forearms on the edge of the table and leaned forward so he could see Buffy. "How did the afternoon go?" he asked.<br>

>Buffy made a wiggly motion with her hand. "Okay, I guess. I'm not really that far behind in any classes, or I wouldn't be if I were a better student."<br>

>"What about Ms. Dortmann?" Willow asked.<br>

>Buffy grimaced. "There's the bad. First session is Monday afternoon."<br>

>"Well, that's a real bring-down," Xander said.<br>

>Oz returned and distributed the beverages. Willow took a sip. "So," she said, "you're back in school. When do we get the gang together again?"<br>

>Buffy pointed around the table. "Looks like we're pretty much together now, Will."<br>

>Willow shook her head. "No, I mean, when are we gonna do the Teen Titans thing, you know, assemble the Avengers."<br>

>"You mean patrol," Buffy said.<br>  
>Willow shrugged. "Sure, if you want to be prosaic."<br>  
>"Well, the thing is..." Buffy's face twisted. "I went out last night."<br>  
>"I'm guessing all did not go well," Oz said. Buffy nodded. "Care to share?" he asked. The Slayer said nothing.<br>  
>"Buffy," Willow said, "you can't just close us out. We know that a lot has happened to you, and we know we can't understand a lot of it, but we're your friends. A lot has happened to us, too. Right, Xander?"<br>  
>He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Don't remind me."<br>

>Willow turned back to Buffy. "So, it's decision time. What's it going to be?"<br>  
>Buffy looked around the circle. "Okay," she said. "I found a vamp last night. I went to stake him and I... couldn't."<br>  
>"No big." Xander held out a hand, palm up. "No training, no practice, you're a little rusty. Could happen to anybody."<br>

>"No." Buffy's voice was very quiet. "I didn't miss. I couldn't pull the trigger. I couldn't because, when I looked at him, I saw... I saw... Angel's face."<br>  
>A heartbeat of stunned silence followed this revelation, then Willow reached out and touched her best friend's shoulder. "Buffy, I don't know what to say."<br>  
>"Yeah," Oz said. "But it's understandable. I mean, it's something to work through."<br>  
>Xander nodded. "What Oz said. This is a minor setback. A little performance anxiety."<br>  
>"Indeed," Willow said. "You can overcome it."<br>  
>"Well, that's great," Cordelia said. All eyes turned to her. "I mean, a Slayer who can't slay? That's... sorry, I was trying to think of a nicer way of saying useless."<br>  
>"Cor..." Xander began.<br>  
>"So, what, we're out risking our lives, maybe about to get it in the neck, and you can't do the deed because this vamp might look a little like Angel around the eyes?"<br>  
>Willow bristled. "Cordelia, that's so--"<br>  
>"No, she's right," Buffy interrupted. "That is what it's about. I'm the Slayer. If I can't slay, what's the point?"<br>  
>Willow frowned. "Still..." She turned to Cordelia. "That was harsh."<br>  
>"Sorry." Cordelia sounded far from it. "But where my life is concerned, I'm not prepared to spare anyone's feelings."<br>

>"Well, I'm so glad we decided to celebrate tonight. Think of what might have happened if we'd been mopey." Xander's sarcasm felt justified.<br>  
>"Hey." They all looked at Oz. He looked around at each of them in turn. "Did we really think this would be easy? It can't be."<br>

>There was a moment of silence, which Willow broke. "I move that we table the last topic and bring it up again at a more appropriate time."<br>  
>Xander raised a hand. "I second that emotion."<br>  
>Oz raised his hand. Buffy rested her elbow on the table, palm out. Cordelia scowled as they looked at her.<br>  
>"Oh, all right," she burst out, turning to Buffy. "But if this gets me killed, I'll be really pissed off and I'm coming back to haunt you."<br>

>Buffy's expression soured. "Get in line."<br>  
>"Hey," Xander said as a new song came blasting over the speakers, "that's the Chemical Brothers." He stood up, holding out his hand to Cordelia. "Dance?"<br>  
>"Sure," she said, taking his hand. They moved onto the dance floor. Soon the trio at the table could only catch glimpses of them among the other dancing couples.<br>  
>"I'm really sorry about what Cordelia said." Willow touched Buffy's arm.<br>  
>The Slayer shook her head. "Don't be. Needed to be said. Maybe not said so plainly, but still..." She focused her attention on the dancers. "Is it just me, or has Xander's dancing improved?"<br>  
>Oz nodded. "Greatly. At least when he's with Cordelia. Alone, he's still pretty much Captain Spastic."<br>  
>"Y'know," Willow said, "in an odd sort of way, they make a cute couple."<br>  
>Buffy watched them dance, and realized that Willow was right, in some weird way. Xander and Cordelia did look good together, both of them tall and dark-haired. Maybe they just seemed strange because their clothes were so different. Maybe if you took away their clothes-<br>  
>"Okay," Buffy said, shaking her head. "This has become officially gag-worthy."<br>  
>"You went to the clothes place, didn't you?" Oz asked, the corner of his mouth upturned. "I wouldn't do that again."<br>  
>"Oz!" A new voice intruded over the music. Buffy turned toward the newcomer, unconsciously shifting her weight for a quick spring into action if needed. It wasn't. He was tall and thin, with olive skin and green eyes. His long hair was so black she suspected a dye job, until she noticed the way the lights played on it. Dye couldn't be that shiny.<br>  
>"Man," Oz said, jumping up from his seat and extending a hand. "Willow, Buffy, this is Trey Garcia." Trey raised his left hand. Buffy noticed that the tips of his long fingers were rough and peeling.<br>  
>"Oh, yeah," Willow said. "You're in the band we saw the other night. Motorized... Industrial?" She raised her hands in a gesture that said 'I know that's not right.'<br>  
>"Engines of Industry," Trey said. "We suck."<br>  
>"Really?" Buffy asked, then realized that she had no idea what he'd said.<br>  
>"Uh, yeah," he said, looking puzzled.<br>  
>"Have a seat," Oz said, steering him toward one of the empty chairs. As Trey folded his long frame onto it, he looked closely at Buffy.<br>  
>"You look familiar. Have I seen you at school?" he asked.<br>  
  
>"Not this year. I just got back from my summer trip. Maybe you saw me last year."<br>  
>He nodded. "That could be it. I seem to put you and school together. So, you have a good summer?"<br>  
>Buffy squinched up her face. "Not one of my best."<br>  
>"Too bad." He sounded sympathetic. Turning to Oz, he said, "So, what's the four one one?"<br>  
>"Yeah, about that." Oz shifted his chair. "I wanted to talk to you about Dingoes. We have a little problem."<br>  
>"Whoa," Trey said. "I don't like getting in the middle of other people's business."<br>  
>"You wouldn't be. I'm the problem." Oz hunched forward over his crossed arms. "See, I have this situation where I'm unavailable for a

few days every month. Lately, it's been costing us some pretty prime gigs. I checked you out the other night. You're good. How would you feel about sitting in for me when I can't make it?"<br>  
>Trey thought about this. "Sort of like a permanent guest host?"<br>

>Oz shrugged. "Something like that."<br>  
>Trey frowned. "Don't know. Makes me feel disloyal to Engines."<br>

>Oz made a stopping gesture. "And I respect that. I'm not trying for a Hubert Sumlin thing here. I don't want to divert your attention from your band. But I meant what I said. You're good. And I'm in the barrel here. I'd appreciate it if you'd consider the offer."<br>

>"Hey, Buffy," Willow said, nudging the Slayer, "let's go get a muffin or something."<br>  
>"Okay," Buffy replied. When they were a significant distance from the table, Willow leaned over and whispered in Buffy's ear, "You know, he's really cute."<br>  
>Buffy smiled. "Thanks, Will. That was about as subtle as a flying anvil."<br>

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>Oz slumped on the sofa in the student lounge. His books were piled on the table in front of him. Willow dropped her books beside them and slid onto the cushion next to him.<br>  
>"Hey," she said. "How's your day?"<br>  
>He smiled. "Better now." He reached for her hand and squeezed it.<br>  
>She leaned closer and lowered her voice to a conspiratorial level. "Heroic Trio's on cable tonight. Wanna watch?"<br>  
>Oz grimaced. "Sounds good, but I've got something else to do."<br>

>"What? This is Heroic Trio. Michelle Yeoh, Maggie Chen, animated skeleton puppetry, the whole megillah.."<br>  
>"I know, and I'm as Hong Kong-y as the next guy, but this is something I've got to take care of."<br>  
>"Oh. Okay." Willow was silent for a couple of heartbeats, then said, "Call me when it's over."<br>  
>"I'll try. If it's not too late."<br>  
>Willow changed the subject. "So, do you think that Trey guy is going to help you out?"<br>  
>Oz considered the question before answering. "I think so. He really is good, and it's not like we're asking him to quit his band."<br>

>"But Dingoes is way better."<br>  
>"Yeah, but loyalty counts for something. If he'd leave them without a thought to join us, then he'd leave us. Besides, we're not asking him to join, just fill in."<br>  
>Willow's eyes twinkled. "But you'd like for him to become a full-time Dingo."<br>  
>Oz's mouth twitched. "I'll admit, the thought of sharing the stage with him has crossed my mind, and it's not painful."<br>  
>Willow nodded, then patted his thigh as she got up. "Well, I've gotta go. You'll call?"<br>  
>Oz drew an 'X' on his chest. "Cross my trout."<br>  
>\*\*\*\*<br>

>Oz strolled down the sidewalk, passing under old oak trees and weaving between small groups of college students enjoying a balmy NoCal evening. The UC-Sunnydale student union was just ahead on his left. He was semi-familiar with the building; Dingoes had attended a 77's concert here a few years ago.<br>

>Four guys were already in room 310 when he walked through the door. He recognized one, a guy with glasses who sat two rows behind him in Honors Comp. The others were strangers, and ranged from a skinny guy with greasy hair and bad skin, still wearing a shirt with Ed's Conoco stitched over the pocket, to a balding man, probably in his mid-late thirties, wearing a sport coat and chinos. Oz nodded to the guy he knew as he took a seat. No one was conversing; rather, they seemed to be trying to find some unoccupied space to focus on. Wow, Oz thought, it's just like standing at a urinal.<br>

>The digital display on his watch flashed to 7:30. The air changed; it seemed thicker, richer. Oz realized that the others seemed to notice it as well. Body language got twitchier, more alert. Almost in unison, ten eyes turned toward the door as Zane Wilder swept in, followed by eight guys, walking, no, marching two abreast. Hey, the guy knows how to make an entrance, Oz thought. Zane stopped about five feet into the room. The eight guys peeled off by twos, positioning themselves in the corners. They stood there, arms crossed, feet apart, as Zane closed the door. And locked it. Suddenly, Oz did not feel sanguine about the situation.<br>

>Zane turned to them, and the energy rolled off of him in waves and washed over them. "Gentlemen," he said, "let me welcome you. Each of you is the possessor of a very special gift. That's why you're here. We want to invite to learn how to use that gift."<br>

>He had the room, Oz could see that. The other four invitees were practically breathless, leaning forward to hear what would come next. Zane spread his hands wide, palms up. "Any questions?" he asked. Oz raised his hand. "Yes, Oz?" Zane said.<br>

>'Um, I may be the stupid guy here, but I don't know what this 'gift' is," Oz said.<br>

>Zane's grin widened. "I think you do, but I know where you're coming from. You're thinking, 'How do I know this guy's for real? Couldn't this be some sort of con?' Well, gentlemen, I'm prepared to show you my bona fides."<br>

>He changed. Up to a point, the process was familiar to Oz. Zane's grin morphed into a snarl, long canines dripping saliva, his thin, straight nose transformed into a snout. The wet crack and snap of bones and tendons elongating and contracting, the subsonic grind of shifting joints, the rip of cloth as shirt and pants shredded. One minute he was a college student standing before them, and the next, the next the wolf was there.<br>

>And then gone. The fur vanished, the teeth receded, his posture straightened. He stood before them as Zane Wilder, buck naked, head cocked to the side, a grin that said 'Isn't that the best trick ever' on his face. One of his followers hurried forward, holding out a robe which Zane wrapped around himself.<br>

>Oz realized that he was breathing fast and shallow, and he was half-out of his chair. The room stank of something thick and animal, but he was willing to bet Xander wouldn't have smelled it. He looked down. The hair on his arms was standing up, and his fingers were curled in toward his palms. He glanced around. The other four visitors were all on point as well. Zane's posse stood in the corners, but their posture was suddenly altered. They looked at Zane, and the only word Oz could think of to describe their attitude was worship.<br>

>"That's what I'm offering you, the ability to control the beast in you." Zane began to move around the room, and all eyes followed him. "No more fearing the full moon, no more locking yourselves in cages or basements or chains. Isn't that what you've dreamed of? But I can show you more. The wolf is part of you, and I can show you how to access him at will. Imagine not only being able to control the

transformation, but being able to use the beast for your own benefit."<br>

>He paused, and the air in the room hummed like an oscillating fan. He turned to the kid Oz knew from school. "You, Lowell, think you could do a little better in gym class if you had the wolf's agility and strength at your fingertips? Sure you could." He turned a full three-sixty, taking in the whole room. "It's as simple as that. Gain control over the beast. Change your life."<br>

>The five guests exchanged looks. The guy in the sport coat raised his hand. "How can you do that?"<br>

>Zane nodded. "I won't lie. It's hard. It's demanding. It's not something you'll master in a weekend." He swept his arm around, taking in the men in the corners. "These gentlemen are at various stages of the learning process. Some are almost to the point of total control, others have barely begun. We want you to join us."<br>

>A tiny alarm bell went off in Oz's head. "Excuse me," he said, standing. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the guards- that's what they are, he thought- tense. The hair rose on the back of his neck. "Not to be suspicious guy here, but what's the cost?"<br>

>"Cost?" Zane leaned forward, rising up on his toes. "There's no cost, Oz, at least not in money."<br>

>Oz nodded. "Okay, then what's the cost in not-money?"<br>

>Zane nodded. "There's no cost, but there is an obligation. In exchange for what I'm prepared to share with you, your fealty to the pack is required."<br>

>"The pack?" The guy in the Ed's Conoco shirt.<br>

>Zane nodded four times, indicating his eight followers. "The pack. You will be loyal to us and we will be loyal to you." He sank slowly down until he was at eye level with the men in the chairs. "It's the moment of decision. What'll it be?"<br>

>Lowell licked his lips. "I'm in," he said, voice hoarse. The other three nodded. Oz looked at them, then at Zane.<br>

>"Sorry," he said. "Guess I'm the lone wolf." He turned and started toward the door.<br>

>"Oz." At the sound of his name, Oz turned. Zane was standing again, staring at him, a feverish light in his eyes. The fact that he was clad only in a bathrobe did not lessen the aura of menace he projected. "You don't understand. This is not an open-ended offer. You join us... or you die." A tense moment passed, then Zane's grin returned. "But I'll do this. You think about it for forty-eight hours, then give us your final answer."<br>

>"I don't need forty-eight hours," Oz said. "I'm not in."<br>

>Zane nodded. "Well, I think you should consider it. And if you think you'll just walk out and not come back, well, I understand that you may not be worried about yourself. So I'll up the ante. If you're not back here in forty-eight hours, we'll come after your little girlfriend. We'll kill her in front of you, then you'll die. How's that for motivation?"<br>

>"You sonofabitch," Oz whispered and stepped toward him. Multi-source growling stopped him. He looked around. The growling came from the guys in the corner, and from the looks of things some of them weren't real good at this control thing yet. Oz stepped back.<br>

>"Actually, that's the correct term," Zane said. "You can walk out that door now, but you'd better be back in forty-eight hours."<br>

>"Write it down," Oz said. As the door swung shut behind him, sweat began to pour down his forehead.<br>

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>"You didn't call last night," Willow said as Oz opened his locker.<br>  
>"Sorry," he said. "Things didn't go as planned."<br>  
>Willow shifted from slightly indignant to concerned. "Is something wrong?"<br>  
>Oz slammed his locker, a little harder than normal. "It's a thing."<br>  
>"What kind of thing?"<br>  
>Oz sighed. "I'm not trying to be all Gary Cooper on you, but it's one of those things you can't really talk about."<br>  
>Willow looked puzzled. Puzzled and a little hurt. "Well, is there anything I can do?"<br>  
>Oz rubbed the back of his neck. "No."<br>  
>Willow blinked. "So, I'll see you at the football game tonight?"<br>  
  
>Oz stopped short. "No. But you should go. And be sure and ask Buffy to go with you."<br>  
>Willow nodded slowly. "Because she needs to get back in the swing of things."<br>  
>"Good a reason as any."<br>  
>Willow's hands went to her hips. "You know, being a couple means sharing bad stuff along with the good."<br>  
>"Will, I don't need-"<br>  
>"You don't need! Something's wrong, and you're hiding it from me."<br>  
>Oz looked down at his feet. "You're right, and I'm sorry, but that's how it has to be."<br>  
>Willow glared at him, eyes flashing sparks. "Okay. I'll go to the game tonight. I'll ask Buffy. We'll sit with Xander. We'll watch Cordelia. Where will you be?"<br>  
>Oz shrugged. "I've got to see somebody. Then I've got to think."<br>  
  
>Willow scowled. "I'm trying very hard to be understanding here, but mostly I'm just pissed off."<br>  
>Oz nodded. "Understood. If everything works out, I'll tell you all about it. That better?"<br>  
>"All details?"<br>  
>"The director's cut. DVD version."<br>  
>"Then I'll do the best I can." Willow took a deep breath. "But something happens to you, and I could have stopped it if I'd known, I'm going to really hate you."<br>  
>"Seems fair."<br>  
>\*\*\*\*<br>  
>Giles looked up at the sound of the library door. He was faintly surprised to see Oz enter by himself. The diminutive guitarist hefted his books onto the counter.<br>  
>"Can I talk to you for a minute?" he asked.<br>  
>"Certainly," Giles replied. Tonight was the first football game, which meant the school had emptied in record time when the last bell rang. "Although I'm a bit surprised you're still here." Oz said nothing, just shrugged. "So, what can I do for you?"<br>  
>Oz leaned over the counter. "It's not really an out-here topic."<br>  
  
>Giles nodded. "The office, then?"<br>  
>Oz slouched in a chair. "Can anybody control a werewolf's transformations?"<br>  
>Giles thought. He rested his chin in his hand and scowled with concentration. "I've never heard a reliable report of any such thing. There are apocryphal tales, but I personally consider them wishful thinking." Oz nodded. "Is there any reason why you are asking about



this?"<br>

>"You know, graduation next spring, what to do after that. Be a lot easier to make plans if I could get a little control over it."<br>

>"Oz." Giles took off his glasses. "I know that your lycanthropy is not an easy burden to bear. I'm not going to try and convince you that there's some hidden good side to it. But it is who you are. It's part of you and-" Giles stopped abruptly.<br>

>"What?" Oz asked.<br>

>"I'm sorry. I was acting as though I were your Watcher. It's not my place to offer counsel, especially not on a subject as personal as this."<br>

>"Well, how about if I said I really wanted to hear what you have to say?"<br>

>Giles put his glasses on and rubbed his hands together while he spoke. "Then I would tell you that you must deal with this part of yourself. I know it's tempting to look for a panacea, but I don't believe one exists. I do, however, believe that you have the strength of character to deal with it and still live your life." The Watcher leaned back in his chair. "I'm sorry if you wanted to hear something more gratifying."<br>

>Oz shook his head. "No, that's pretty much what I already knew." He took a deep breath. "Could I have a minute?" he asked Giles.<br>

>"Of course," the librarian said, getting to his feet. "Take as long as you need."<br>

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>The Monroe quarterback took the snap and wheeled to his right, reaching out to stick the ball in the fullback's gut, but before the transaction could be completed, Larry Blaisdell shot the gap and knocked both of them to the ground. The ball bounced free. Larry scrambled up from atop his two prone opponents and flung himself on top of it, cradling it to his chest and returning possession to the Sunnydale Razorbacks.<br>

>A roar went up from the Sunnydale crowd. The cheerleaders were quick to take advantage, channeling aimless enthusiasm into focused advocacy.<br>

>Buffy dipped into the giant box of popcorn sitting on Willow's lap and tossed some kernels into her mouth. "Hey," she said around a mouthful of crushed snack, "this feels pretty good."<br>

>"Yeah," Xander said from his seat on the opposite side of Willow, "everything looks great." The girls looked at him, realizing that he wasn't watching the field. Following his gaze, they found that his focus was directed toward one of the maroon-and-gold clad cheerleaders.<br>

>"Cordelia looks okay," Buffy offered.<br>

>"Yeah," Willow said. "You hardly notice the bandages."<br>

>"I prefer not to think of them as bandages," Xander said. "More as fight wrappings. It's way sexier."<br>

>Buffy and Willow looked at him, then at each other. "Okay," the Slayer drawled, "you're now officially the front runner in the weirdest boyfriend contest."<br>

>"In many categories," Willow added under her breath.<br>

>"So, you don't know what's wrong with Oz," Buffy said, re-stating what Willow had already told her.<br>

>"I'm pretty sure it's of the wolfy persuasion," Willow said.<br>

>"Well, I have to say that you're acting very mature about it."<br>

>"You think?" Willow glanced over at Buffy. "Then my acting has

improved, because I'm feeling very immature. And childish. And even a little petulant."<br>

>The roar of the crowd snapped their attention back to the field. A Razorback was in the open field, streaking away from his pursuers. He high-stepped out of a desperation tackle at the fifteen-yard line and jogged across the goal line. The scoreboard changed to Sunnydale 34, Visitor 6.<br>

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>The score was 48-6, Sunnydale, when the final gun sounded. Willow and Buffy gathered up empty cups and boxes while Xander fidgeted.<br>

>"C'mon," he whined. "Let's go."<br>

>Willow glared at him. "You know what would help us go faster? Some help, some help from somebody who's standing here not doing anything."<br>

>"If I see anybody like that, I'll tell them." He hopped from one foot to the other as Buffy picked up the last stray napkin.<br>

>"What's with him?" the Slayer asked as he ambled down the steps ahead of them.<br>

>"Fear," Willow whispered. "He's afraid that if he doesn't get down to her soon, Cordelia will be overcome by the atmosphere and throw herself at one of the players."<br>

>Xander vaulted over the rail and dropped to the track. Buffy and Willow remained in the stands. Cordelia was huddled with the other cheerleaders around a pile of gym bags. Buffy noticed a tall, striking African-American woman walking toward them. She nudged Willow.<br>

>"Who's that?" Buffy asked, pointing with her chin.<br>

>"Oh, that's Ms. Hollis," Willow answered. They watched as the teacher leaned into the huddle and said a few words, looking around at the squad. She extended a fist into the center of the group. Each cheerleader placed a hand in the circle, like spokes on a wheel. Ms. Hollis said something else, then they all shouted, "Go 'backs!" and threw their hands in the air. Some of the squad's members drifted off with parents, some with boyfriends. Cordelia picked up her bag. Ms. Hollis put an arm around her shoulder and leaned down to say something directly in her ear. Cordelia nodded, a puzzled expression on her face. Ms. Hollis smiled and walked away.<br>

>Xander took a few hesitant steps across the track. Cordelia saw him and a wide grin broke across her flushed face.<br>

>"Did I see that?" Buffy asked. "Did she actually look happy to see him?"<br>

>Willow pursed her lips. "It's one of the great mysteries of our time. Right up there with who left the heads on Easter Island." The redhead shrugged. "But there does seem to be a thing there."<br>

>Buffy looked at her friend out of the corner of her eye. "Are you okay with that?"<br>

>Willow shrugged. "Pretty much have to be, don't I?"<br>

>"Hey, guys," Xander called, his arm around Cordy, "what's with the slowness?"<br>

>"Oh," Buffy said, with exaggerated politeness, "are we being invited to join the par-tay?"<br>

>"We'll take the steps," Willow said. It took them a couple of minutes to go down the steps and wind around the stands to meet their friends.<br>

>"Hey, Cordelia," Buffy said. "Good job. Way to encourage the boys to victory."<br>

>Cordelia continued to beam. "Thanks. Where's Oz?"<br>

>Willow's mouth did its quirky little thing. "He couldn't be here."<br>  
>"So," Xander said, "you guys want to go to the Bronze?"<br>  
>Willow shook her head. "Don't think so. I'm not really in a Bronze mood."<br>  
>Xander nodded. "Okay, bad idea. We can do something else."<br>  
>"No," Buffy said. "You guys go ahead. I'll walk Will home."<br>  
>"You sure?" Xander asked, but his heart wasn't really in it.<br>  
>Buffy gave a firm nod. "Positive. Now go."<br>  
>Xander and Cordelia walked off, hand in hand. Buffy and Willow watched for a moment, then turned and headed in the opposite direction. They went for some blocks in silence before Buffy spoke.<br>  
>"So," she said, "is this some of your petulant side coming out?"<br>  
>"Maybe," Willow replied.<br>  
>"But you'll see Oz tomorrow," Buffy prompted.<br>  
>Willow shook her head. "He's pretty much incommunicado for the weekend."<br>  
>"Wow." They walked a bit further in silence, heads down. Buffy spoke again. "Will, I don't want to be the voice of doom here, although it's usually my role, but have you thought about the possibility-"<br>  
>"That he's cheating?" Willow looked up at the stars. "It's crossed the old mind, but I don't think so. I mean, not that I have lots and lots of experience in this area, and what experience I've had probably isn't very helpful, but it doesn't seem right. I mean, if Oz met somebody else, would he quarantine himself for the entire weekend? It practically screams 'Something wrong here.' Plus, I just think that if Oz found somebody else, he'd tell me. Not to be mean, but because that's who he is."<br>  
>"If he wanted to spare your feelings?"<br>  
>Willow shook her head firmly. "No, Oz is of the 'rip off that band-aid' school. All the hurting up front." Her mouth compressed into a thin line. "This is the wolf. I can feel it."<br>  
>"Feminine intuition, huh?"<br>  
>"It's more than that. Buffy, I've been studying those discs I found, the ones Miss Calendar left. I'm trying to learn Wicca."<br>  
>Buffy frowned. "You think that's smart? I mean, isn't that stuff pretty powerful?"<br>  
>Willow nodded. "Yeah, but I'm not just messing around. I've been having... some sort of visions. They're creepy, and I don't know what they mean, and they're driving me crazy."<br>  
>"And you hope the Wicca can help you?"<br>  
>"Yes, either control them or get rid of them."<br>  
>"What does this have to do with Oz?"<br>  
>"Giles says that somehow I'm more... attuned to things. And one of the things I'm attuned to is Oz. I can't explain, not in any way that makes sense, and not in any real detail, but I can sort of... sense things sometimes. And what I'm sensing off Oz is real turmoil. And I know that nothing causes that like, like the wolf."<br>  
>"Wow." Buffy bowed her head. "You sure haven't been sitting around twiddling your thumbs while I've been gone, have you?"<br>  
>"I couldn't. We couldn't." Willow's voice held the slightest of edges.<br>  
>"I know." Buffy took a deep breath. "Sorry. I guess when I decided

to come back, a part of me wanted Sunnydale to be exactly the same, for you guys to be exactly the same, and that can't happen." <br>

>They went a few blocks wrapped in deep quiet, then Willow said, "Exactly the same, huh? How sad is that?"<br>

>"Yeah," Buffy replied, grinning. "I think homesickness for this place pretty much defines 'dysfunctional.'"<br>

>"I didn't mean to sound, you know, bitchy."<br>

>"It's okay." Buffy looked at her friend. "Hey, you up for a patrol tomorrow night?"<br>

>"Really?"<br>

>"Yeah. I need to do it, and I can't think of anyone I'd rather have with me than you."<br>

>"What about Xander and Cordelia?"<br>

>Buffy's face scrunched. "Let's let them have a quiet Saturday night, or... whatever kind of Saturday night they like to have. Let's make it you and me, just like in the beginning." Buffy's voice became quieter. "Unless you're worried about the hesitation problem."<br>

>Willow grinned. "What, me worry? You'll be fine."<br>

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>Oz felt something warm on his arm and glanced up. The first rays of the sun had worked their way across his desk until they lay across his forearm. It was morning already. He had been up all night.<br>

>He closed the book and pushed it away from him. As he got up from the chair, joints stiff, he made a mental note to take a long shower. A long, hot shower. With plenty of soap. But a little nap was the first thing in order. He didn't even bother to pull off his shoes, just crawled on top of the blankets and collapsed into a deep, dreamless slumber that had more in common with coma than with sleep.<br>

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>"Hello, Willow," Joyce Summers said, swinging the door wide open. Willow stepped across the threshold.<br>

>"Ready?" Buffy's voice came from behind her mother. The Slayer bag hung over her shoulder.<br>

>"You betcha," Willow replied. "I'm wearing my lucky vamp-hunting sweatshirt."<br>

>"Then let's do it." Buffy brushed past Joyce and headed out the door.<br>

>"Buffy." Her mother's voice stopped the Slayer cold.<br>

>"Mom," she said, turning back, "we've been over this. You can't keep-"<br>

>"You might want to take a heavier jacket," Joyce said. "It could get chilly."<br>

>Buffy stared at her mother for a second, then nodded and went to the hall closet. "You're right. I wasn't thinking."<br>

>"That was weird," Willow said as they went down the front steps.<br>

>"Yeah," Buffy replied. "If she worries about the slaying, she'll go crazy, so she... What's the word? In psych? When you hide one set of fears behind another?"<br>

>"You mean sublimation?"<br>

>"That's it. She's sublimating like crazy."<br>

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>The UC-Sunnydale campus didn't seem so balmy tonight as Oz made his way toward the union. He found himself sniffing the air and twitching at shadows. Nothing was going to happen on the sidewalk; there were too many people around for that. At least, he thought there were too

many people; who knew what Zane might try? Oz shoved his hands deeper into the pockets of his jacket.<br>

>He smelled them, seconds before the voice behind him said, "Oz. Glad you could show." He turned, trying for a surprised expression. After all, why let them know he could detect them?<br>

>Two of the pack stood there, loose and rangy. Utter confidence expressed itself in their every movement and attitude. The taller one, a guy with dark hair and a stubbly beard, did the talking.<br>

>"Zane said you weren't a pussy. Guess your little girlfriend was the right button to push, huh?"<br>

>"Uh, yeah," Oz said, running one hand through his hair and returning it to his pocket. "That's one thing that bothers me. The whole pack is guys. I mean, do you have women problems or anything? Not that I'm trying to judge."<br>

>Real anger flashed in their eyes. "We don't have any problem with women, we just know where they belong. 'Gender equality' is an idea that's unnatural. The bitches don't run the pack; they obey their mates." The talker stretched his neck and turned his head, like he was working a kink out of a muscle. "We don't lack for female companionship."<br>

>Oz nodded, keeping a straight face. "And why would you?" he muttered under his breath.<br>

>"Come on," the tall guy said. "Time's wasting and Zane wants to see you." They turned away from the union.<br>

>Oz hung back. "Where are we going?"<br>

>The silent guy's eyes lit up, and the tall guy snickered. "Okay, I know this is like, the biggest cliché in the world, but we can do this hard, or we can do it easy. Your choice." His eyes gleamed.

"I've always wanted to say that."<br>

>"Okay, you've said." Oz inclined his head toward them. "Lead on."<br>

>They crossed the campus, heading away from the union and the bookstore, with their clusters of students, and toward the main grouping of classroom buildings. The bulk of Ridder Stadium loomed over them, and Oz realized it was their destination. The west side of Ridder housed classrooms, a student weight room, racquetball courts, and meeting rooms for the athletic teams.<br>

>They went up the concrete steps to the second floor and pushed through the gray steel door. Midway down the hall on their left, the door to one of the meeting rooms stood slightly ajar. As they drew closer, Oz could see the broken lock. He hunched his shoulders, driving his hands into his pockets as they entered.<br>

>A large window dominated the far wall. If Oz chose to look through it, he could see the track and the football field. The stadium lights were on, illuminating students as they ran around the track. A long table with a laminated top ran down the center of the room. The tabletop was patterned to look like some sort of wood. The other members of the pack were seated around the table.<br>

>Zane Wilder sat at the end of the table. Oz moved to his left, standing at the opposite end, keeping the table's length between them. Zane grinned (Oz couldn't help himself; it was the only word that fit) wolfishly. His dark eyes glittered in the dim light that filtered through the window.<br>

>"Well, Oz," he said as he stood, "we could waste a lot of time on preamble or we can get right to the point. I think you're a to the point guy. Am I right?"<br>

>"About that, or in general?"<br>

>"That's good. So, it's been forty-eight hours. What's your choice?"<br>

>Oz raised his eyes to stare directly into the eyes of the leader of the pack. "I'm out."<br>  
>Zane exhaled. "Well, then," he said, his voice calm and reasonable, "you die."<br>  
>He transformed, turning full wolf as he came up over the table, his movements a black and gray blur. His speed was breathtaking; Oz barely had time to raise his arms as the beast sprang, jaws open.<br>

>But Oz did raise his arms, and the tranquilizer darts he held each hand, the darts he'd filched from Giles' office, sank deep, one going into the throat, the other into the chest of the beast. The creature's bulk bowled him over, knocking him to the floor, but now his main danger was the weight. The tranquilizer had done its work. Oz scrambled out from underneath his unconscious foe, fumbling two more darts out of the pockets of his jacket.<br>

>"Okay," he said, looking around at the faces of the stunned pack members, "this ends here. I'm walking out. Anybody moves on me, they get what he got. Anybody comes after me once I'm gone, well, we dance." He began to back toward the door, but no one moved. They were all stunned.<br>

>It took all his self-discipline to back down the hall, keeping an eye on the door, rather than turning and running. His jangled nerves did not begin to calm until he was across campus and in his van. The darts fell from shaking hands and rolled under the seat. It took two tries to get his keys in the ignition, but once the engine started, he felt much better.<br>

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>Gramercy Park was not as popular as Hammersmith, and for that reason saw fewer fatalities. Buffy and Willow sat in the swings, looking up at the stars.<br>

>"You ever wonder what's up there?" Willow asked.<br>

>"Sometimes," Buffy admitted.<br>

>"I think about it a lot," Willow said. "I mean, I used to think about it before, but now, I think about it more."<br>

>"Why?"<br>

>"Well, I mean, there's so much stuff here that I never imagined. If I've lived on earth my whole life, and I didn't know what was here, what could be out there that I've never even thought of?"<br>

>"Will, you're weird."<br>

>"Perhaps."<br>

>"Hey," Buffy said, "did you hear that?"<br>

>"No," Willow replied.<br>

>"Come on." Buffy slipped out of the swing and crept toward the pavilion. Three sides of the structure were open to the air, but the fourth, the one closest to them, was a stone wall. As they drew closer, Willow could hear scuffling noises. Buffy ducked her head around the corner for a quick look, then turned to Willow. The Slayer held up one finger. Willow nodded.<br>

>They went around the corner fast, Buffy hugging the wall, Willow swinging out wide. The vamp looked up, startled. Buffy went straight for the heart, but the female vamp blocked her first thrust and delivered an impressive counterpunch, a right hand that the Slayer barely slipped. She attempted a sweep-kick, but the vamp jumped over the move. Buffy had to roll to avoid a kick. She sprang up, more cautious now. This vampire knew what she was doing. Willow stayed off well to her left, keeping out of the vamp's peripheral vision. The demon snarled, realizing their strategy. It turned toward Buffy, recognizing the greater danger she represented. Willow took two running steps and leaped onto the vampire's back. The creature spun,

flinging her off. Willow slid across the slick concrete floor and hit one of the support poles. A small cry of pain escaped her lips. The vampire raced across the floor. Willow barely had time to raise an arm in a pathetic attempt to ward off the attack. The vamp grabbed the front of her shirt, yanking her up toward its slaverling fangs.<br>

>Willow fell back against the pole, yelping as her head banged off it while ash showered down on her. Buffy stood over her, stake in hand.<br>

>"Well," Willow groaned, reaching up to touch her aching head, "I guess Cordelia doesn't have to be worried."<br>

>"No," Buffy said, extending a hand to her friend, "if it was Cordelia, I still might have trouble pulling the trigger."<br>

>\*\*\*\*<br>

>"Have either of you seen the darts for the tranquilizer gun?" Giles asked.<br>

>Oz and Willow looked at each other, then at the librarian. "No. Is something wrong?" Willow asked.<br>

>"Six of them appear to be missing." Giles looked at Oz for a moment, then smoothed his tie.<br>

>"I'll keep an eye open for them," Oz said, his face a mask of innocence.<br>

>"I've been looking for them for the better part of a week." Giles picked up his briefcase and jacket. "Take care."<br>

>"Will do," Willow said, waving as the librarian left. "Ready?" she said, turning back to Oz.<br>

>He nodded. "Yeah." He stepped into the cage. Willow reached out, twining her fingers through the wire mesh. Oz placed the tips of his fingers against hers.<br>

>"I wish..." Willow's voice trailed away.<br>

>"I know. I wish it, too." Oz stroked her hand. "But I couldn't-"<br>

>"I know." A small, sad smile blossomed on Willow's face. "I'll see you in the morning."<br>

>"Okay." Oz watched her leave. When she was gone, he went to a corner of the cage. He undressed, folding his clothes and placing them in the locker, then sat down on the floor to wait for sundown.<br>

>\*\*\*<br>

>"He's coming!" the white-coated assistant hissed. The clipboard in Dr. Swopes' hand dipped for a heartbeat. Mouth dry, the doctor turned toward the door.<br>

>The mayor swept in, resplendent in a dove-gray suit, his security man Nicholas trailing him. "Dr. Swopes," the Mayor said, clasping the man's right hand in both of his. "I understand we have good news."<br>

>"Y-Yes, sir," the doctor said. "Right this way."<br>

>They left the office and entered a long, narrow room, lined floor to ceiling with cages. The cages were big enough to hold a large dog. Thirteen of the cages contained slumbering forms.<br>

>"How are they?" the Mayor asked, rubbing his hands together.<br>

>"They're all in perfect condition. Pick-up was easy. The alpha male was incapacitated and the others became confused and unfocused. We were able to capture all of them without harm."<br>

>"Excellent, Swopes, excellent. Where is the alpha male?"<br>

>"Right this way, sir." Swopes led the Mayor to a cage at the far end of the room. "We have him sedated and separated from the others."<br>

>The Mayor nodded. He squatted, forearms resting on his thighs, to  
look into the cage. His eyes glowed with the pride of ownership as he  
looked at the large wolf, electrodes attached to patches of shaved  
skin, a muzzle binding its jaws.<br>  
>"You know," he said to Swopes as he stood, "I always wanted a  
puppy."<br>  
>\*\*\*<br>  
>End of "An Offer You Can't Refuse."<br>  
> <p><p>

End  
file.